

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

JANUARY 1998

THE SOLBORNE VAMPIRE

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to get in that
window would
be to fly in,
unless a man
could run up
the sheer wall like
a human spider..."

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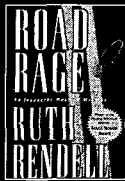
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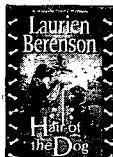
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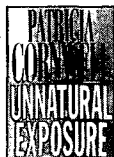
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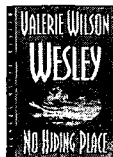
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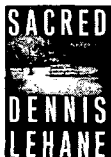
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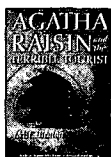
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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

LIN PO AND THE BABOONS by B. H. Schrier	6
MURDER ON THE TOP FLOOR by Robert P. Jordan	22
MORE PEOPLE LIKE ME by Antigone Barton	54
LIME SOUP by Gary Alexander	62
THE SOLBORNE VAMPIRE by Charles Sheffield	74
NIGHT WORK by Steve Lindley	114
THE KOMPETITION KILLER by James A. Noble	130

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE WHITE ROAD by E. F. Bozman	144
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DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	73
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling	111
SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED"	129
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	154
THE STORY THAT WON	157

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Season's Greetings from the staff of AHMM



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New Poetry Contest

\$48,000.00 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the brand new North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in **ONLY ONE** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

The National Library of Poetry

Suite 6126

1 Poetry Plaza

Owings Mills, MD 21117-6282

Or enter online at www.poetry.com

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.



Gordon Steele of Virginia, pictured above, is the latest Grand Prize Winner in The National Library of Poetry's North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. As the big winner, he was awarded \$1,000.00 in cash.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

"Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," added Mr. Ely.

World's Largest Poetry Organization

Having awarded over \$150,000.00 in prizes to poets worldwide in recent years, The National Library of Poetry, founded in 1982 to promote the artistic accomplishments of contemporary poets, is the largest organization of its kind in the world.

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LIN PO AND THE BABOONS

B. H. Schrier

Illustration by Friedrich Haas

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/98

Today was the feast day of a minor religion, not important enough for a general holiday but large enough to bring thousands more pedestrians into the streets of Canton. Lin Po rode his bicycle in and out of the tapestry of loud, smelly, impatient traffic, tensely alert for dangers that were becoming all too common in modern China.

From the handlebars dangled a good luck charm, tied there by his widowed mother. Lin Po did not burden himself with superstitions. His generation was born in the Great Leap Forward, and his mind was tempered in the fires of the Cultural Revolution.

No, he did not let himself be swayed by thoughts of the supernatural. And patience was one of Lin Po's virtues, one that had helped gain him a reputation as a brilliant detective in the civil police of Guangtung province.

Today he was summoned to headquarters, to the office of his chief inspector. No reason was given, and Lin Po was surprised to see, parked in front of the main entrance, a parade of motorcycles surrounding a large black limousine.

"Most honorable foreign secretary, please meet Lin Po, one most faithful to Mao and our best young talent."

Lin Po bowed deeply. The foreign secretary gave a nod. "Send him to Zaire without delay. And do not recall him until this mystery is solved."

He glanced coldly at Lin Po. "Do not waste my time with tales of rabid monkeys or the occult. I expect you to bring justice to that dark land and to uphold the honor of China. Find the murderer. The eyes of all the world will be upon you."

The foreign secretary wasted no time in goodbyes. His motorcade departed with a roar of engines and a whooping of sirens, leaving Lin Po breathless.

Zaire was in Africa, half a world away.

Lin Po knew little of Zaire and nothing of the ambassador. But thirty hours of cramped seats, howling engines, and crowded airports gave him plenty of time to read the reports. Two things were clear: the ambassador was dead, and he had died in a most horrible way.

The record of the Chinese ambassador to Zaire made refreshing reading. Unlike too many of his predecessors, he had not spent his time in the casinos. Using embassy funds he had acquired a farm some kilometers from the capital. Ordinarily this would have been a violation of the penal code. But the farm

was not for his own profit. It was to show our African brothers methods of intensive agriculture as used successfully in China for thousands of years.

So devoted was the ambassador to this end that he spent almost every weekend at this farm, leaving wife and family in the city. Here, with the help of an interpreter and eight volunteer families of Chinese farmers, he taught African peasants how to grow healthy foods for their families and for the marketplace.

The project was successful, and in five years the ambassador enlarged the property to nearly a thousand hectares. He also created a cooperative to take produce promptly to market and to ensure that farmers were not cheated by city folk. All this took much time and energy, for which the ambassador drew no pay.

Now tragedy had struck the great man down. He was found lying in a field of banana trees, his body torn and mauled. All about were fierce baboons, howling mad. Death by wild animals was the opinion of the local coroner, although the case had not yet been officially closed.

Lin Po reached Kinshasa, the capital, much in need of sleep. He would not sleep yet, for a uniformed officer stood at the arrival gate holding over his

head a placard bearing Lin Po's name in Chinese characters. The man was tall, with broad shoulders thick with muscle, and so black his skin seemed almost indigo in the full sun.

"I am Sergeant Tapetty Callahan," he announced in French. "I speak English, French, Flemish, six local dialects, and the patois of the trader. Which do you prefer?"

They agreed on English. Callahan took Lin Po's small baggage and pushed ahead through the crowds. "I will assist you during your stay. My car is this way. Hurry, please. We have many kilometers yet to drive."

The paved streets of Kinshasa were so crowded, and all drove with such speed and daring, that Lin Po rode with one fist clamped on the door post and the other arm wrapped around the seat back. When the pavement gave way to gravel, the road became brutally rough, and he had to grip the car to keep his head from bouncing off his neck.

South and east of Kinshasa are great mountains, and roads that are not so great. There could be no sleeping in the car, a battered Land Rover with a perforated muffler. Besides, Lin Po thought Callahan drove like a lunatic, one who did not re-

duce speed for any but the worst obstacles.

"Must make time, you know. Don't want to get caught in the wild after dark." Callahan grinned. "The leopard hunts at night, and he loves tourists. Raw."

They passed the time discussing the matter of the ambassador. "I agree," said Callahan, "that the coroner's opinion seems fanciful. Baboons rarely attack a human unless that person is dying or the baboon is rabid. But they are social creatures, fiercely protective of their young, and they will act together like jackals."

The road narrowed until it seemed they must surely fall into the river. A truck swarming with smiling passengers came toward them, taking up the whole road. "Perhaps," gasped Lin Po, "the ambassador made an enemy?" He closed his eyes and waited for the crash.

"Several!" grinned Callahan, showing a mouthful of white teeth. "I have questioned them, but without a witness we have no proof of a felony." Just in time they reached a wider stretch, and the truck passed inches away in a rush of warm air and a stink of diesel.

"Surely you have formed some opinion?" Lin Po ducked a low-hanging branch. "Who are these enemies?"

With one hand Callahan removed his cap and scratched his close-shorn skull. "My first choice is Kanini. A farmer with a violent temper, he is much feared by his neighbors. Indeed, he has been accused of practicing witchcraft, which is contrary to our laws, but no firm evidence was brought to the court."

"And what was his quarrel with the ambassador?" asked Lin Po. He wished he had brought sunglasses. Here at the equator the sun's glare was intense.

"Kanini's wife once worked as the ambassador's interpreter. She is young and beautiful, and he was a long way from wife and family. Who knows? But it is what Kanini believed, and not the truth, that would bring about murder.

"Then we have Pouladou, a known poacher and layabout. He was angered when the ambassador fenced the farm and cleared some upland pasture. Such activity is good for bananas but keeps away the poacher's favorite game.

"Next I would put the notorious woman Divinity, who made public outcry against the esteemed ambassador, claiming he had put the evil eye on her granddaughter, who was born blind. A ridiculous tale, and the ambassador refused to pay to shut her mouth. She hounded

him in public until he had her jailed for harassment."

"She could do him little harm when in jail." Lin Po decided that at the first opportunity he would weave himself a hat to keep the sun off, a conical hat of the sort that was traditional in the Far East.

"But Divinity was released from the cells the week of the tragedy. And before witnesses she predicted the day and the hour of the ambassador's death." Callahan jerked the wheel. The Land Rover swerved sharply left and then right, just straddling a large hole in the road.

"Each of these had a reason to hate," said Lin Po. "Did any have opportunity?"

"None of them has an alibi that can be proved. But each quotes the coroner's story that baboons were the probable killers. I've seen the man's wounds, and I tend to agree."

Lin Po grunted as a wheel slammed into a nasty pothole. "Perhaps I should first speak to the coroner."

The coroner was also the only doctor in this rural area. They found him at work in his clinic, lancing a boil on the neck of an old man whose white hair was cut close to his skull. Doctor and patient sat astraddle the same crude bench, outdoors under a giant mammey tree.

About them stirred the life of rural Zaire, squawking chickens chasing after a cat, goats standing on their hind legs to reach for a leaf, two half-grown dogs fighting over a bone, and flies, the ever-present flies of Africa.

The doctor spoke more French than English. Lin Po had polished his French while serving as an advisor in post-war Vietnam. But the doctor spoke Walloon French, and Callahan had to help translate more than once.

Lin Po asked if he might make himself a hat. The doctor spoke in patois to the old man, who jumped up from the bench and climbed a palm tree with a surprising show of agility. He threw down a large branch. Lin Po stripped away enough material for his hat and sat down on a stone near the doctor's bench to start his weaving.

After some lemonade and polite talk Lin Po remarked, "I am surprised that subsistence farmers can afford to pay a doctor of your stature."

"I am paid by the government," he answered, applying red-orange antiseptic to the old man's wound. "It's little enough, but the farmers bring me gifts of vegetables and we get a government cottage rent-free, such as it is."

Behind him a screen door

slapped open, and a woman in a spotless white uniform stepped briskly outside. She led a child by the hand, a child of five or six years whose head and left arm were bandaged. She stopped and let the child watch what Lin Po was making. The detective finished a small hat and braided a circlet to fit inside, just the size of the child's head.

The child was delighted with her gift. But when Lin Po looked again at the doctor, it was plain he had not pleased everyone. He started at once on another hat, this time for himself.

"Gentlemen, this is my nurse and my only sister, Joanna." The doctor glared a warning at Lin Po.

She was tall and slim, and her eyes slanted like those of a cat above broad cheekbones. Her feet were not too large, her skin not too dark, and her hair was put up in neatly braided rows. She was the most beautiful African woman Lin Po had ever seen, and she smiled at him.

"A pleasure, Joanna, believe me," said Lin Po with a bow. "I am here to inquire into the tragic death of the ambassador from China."

Her eyes widened in fear, and her gaze darted to meet her brother's eyes. "I saw nothing, nothing at all." She beckoned to another patient, and they disappeared behind the screen door.

Lin Po pretended not to notice. Joanna feared her brother, that much was certain, but it could mean nothing. Women feared their brothers in rural China, too.

The doctor told his story while examining the eyes of a woman. "The body had not been moved when I arrived. He lay where he fell, across a ruined banana tree, arms crooked to cover his face. I was five meters away when a large male baboon leaped out and put himself between me and the corpse." He told his patient, "Look over my left shoulder, please, and do not squint."

He spoke casually, without emotion. "The constable and I each seized a pole and beat the animal to chase it away. All the time I was examining the body, the constable stayed on guard, for that banana patch was surrounded by baboons, as many as thirty. They made noises and gestures of aggression." And to the patient, "Now look over my right shoulder. That's it. Open wide."

He continued. "His wounds were many. I counted at least fifty bites, all typical of baboons, the gashes of those fearsome canine teeth. Much blood was scattered among the bananas." He glanced at Lin Po. "The cause of death? His throat was torn open. The poor man died slowly from loss of blood."

Lin Po watched all sorts of exotic creatures in the nearby trees, on the rooftops, scampering and slithering across the bare earth of the compound, but he saw no baboons. "What might have maddened the beasts?"

"That I can answer. At the gate near the road hung the body of a full-grown male baboon, or what was left of it. It seems the troop had been raiding the bananas. The ambassador ordered that they be shot, but no one would use a weapon against them. In this land, you see, the baboon is thought to be the bearer of the soul when someone dies.

"But the ambassador killed the troop leader and scattered the rest. He had the beast hung from a post for bait, to call them back so he could shoot all of them. Such an act causes a great disturbance among the troop, you see."

In a gesture of hospitality the doctor invited Lin Po and Callahan to lunch. It was Joanna who served them, but she had nothing to say as she did it. Curiously, she did not sit down to eat until the guests had finished and were making their goodbyes.

This was like a custom of the old China, one still current in outlying provinces, where the women must serve the men first before they themselves can eat. But the doctor and his sister,

though of African blood, were from Brussels and educated in Europe.

Lin Po added another name to his list.

"So you find the coroner a bit overprotective of his sister?" Sergeant Callahan asked.

"Indeed." Lin Po saw that Callahan took a turning not far from the clinic. Here the road was well mended, the fencerows neatly mown. Banana trees, row after row, grew with their fruit already sealed in clear plastic bags to ward off pests and birds.

"Here is the ambassador's farm," said Callahan, "and here is where he died." He steered the truck off the road.

This field was like the others, double rows of bananas between rows of nut palms. To Lin Po's eye, a remarkable neatness had been achieved despite the slope of the hillside. The palms scattered broken shadows across the intensely green banana leaves. But when they passed through the gate and walked a hundred meters into the field, the neatness changed to wanton destruction.

An outline made with white chalk dust marked the spot where the huddled body had been found. Yellow police barricade tape tied one palm to another, enclosing a square.

"It is much as I found it," said Callahan, "except the carcass of the baboon is gone and the body of the victim. His truck was parked there, not far from the gate. And here," he pointed, "lay five spent shotgun shells."

"And how many dead baboons?" asked Lin Po.

"None." Sergeant Callahan flashed his large smile.

Lin Po stayed outside the taped square, slowly walking around it, helped greatly by the shade from his newly made hat. He looked both inside the tape where banana plants lay broken and outside where all remained neat and green.

A hoo-hooting sounded nearby. Callahan drew and cocked his 11mm revolver, eyes toward the wild calls. When he looked for Lin Po, he saw no one. "Detective Lin! Are you all right?"

His voice came from not far away. "Quite all right. I have found a curiosity. Could you look, please?"

The baboons were closer now, unseen because of the bananas but crying as loudly as any flight of crows. "I am coming. Do not run. It might incite them," said Callahan.

He found Lin Po calmly kneeling at the base of a nut palm. "These marks in the wood are unusual. What is their cause, do you think?" The baboons fell silent, but the noise of their dart-

ing, scampering feet was an ominous, threatening sound.

"Scratches, scrapes." Callahan squatted in the dust. "Made by something metal, and all around the tree at the same height." He brushed the rough tree with his hand. "Someone rubbed soil into the marks to hide them."

"Made by a chain, would you say?" Lin Po pointed to a deep gouge wet with sap. "Not a rope, certainly."

"A chain, yes. Something was chained to this tree. And the chain moved violently, time and again."

"Look around us at the dust," said Lin Po. "It was swept recently to wipe out any marks of whatever was at the end of that chain."

"To wipe out footprints as well." The sweeping had been hurried, and Callahan stooped to point at a mark impressed in the soil, partly swept away. It showed the edge of a boot heel, not a sandal nor a sneaker, and not the print of a naked foot.

"Whatever was here was gone when I arrived," said Callahan. "I had the entire field, two hectares, walked over by my constables. We found nothing. But we were not looking for scratches on a palm tree."

Lin Po produced a steel tape measure. The palm tree grew thirty meters from where the body was found. "In a direct line

with the gate. Coincidence, do you think?"

Each looked at the other's eyes. Experienced police do not believe in coincidence.

Suddenly the baboons were upon them, leaping up and down, darting toward them and as quickly away again, always with those daggerlike teeth bared and howling fiercely. Callahan fired one shot from his 11mm, a huge sound that Lin Po felt *thump!* in his head. The animals scattered in an instant and were gone before he could draw a breath.

They retreated to the Land Rover. When they were safely inside and grinding up the lane to the farmhouse, Lin Po said, "You fired into the air."

"Why kill them?" Callahan shrugged. "That noise was sufficient." They drove in silence until he said, "It was a trap, a clever trap. Something was chained to that tree, something that would bring the baboons on the run."

"Something to bring the ambassador, too." Lin Po nodded. "Another baboon, perhaps, captured and chained near where the ambassador had hung his macabre scarecrow. A trap within a trap. The ambassador thinks he has drawn the baboons to his scarecrow. The killer, however, has drawn the ambassador to his clutches. The

closer the victim went to the captive animal, the more agitated the troop became, thinking he would harm the captive."

"I forgot to mention, something is missing from that picture," said Callahan. "The ambassador's shotgun. I found five empty shells near the body but no weapon."

After a moment of hesitation Lin Po clapped his hands. "Excellent! Where is his shotgun? And another thing. Why was the ambassador such a poor shot? Answer these and we will be close to the truth."

They drove next to the small farm of Kanini, but it was Kanini's wife who came to the door. She was a handsome woman as Callahan had said but not the equal of Joanna, Lin Po decided. Too tall, for one, and her figure was fuller. Also, she was a woman with a mind of her own.

"Get out, policeman!" she shouted, and she grabbed a staff of some dark, heavy wood. "Get out my property, or I sic the dogs on you!"

The dogs lay in the shade, their heads raised and their ears up.

Callahan asked, "Where is Kanini? We would ask—"

"Ask him what? Ask do he kill the China man? Don't make joke with me. What man gonna

say he was the one who kill? My man not so stupid!"

Callahan took a step closer, and she raised the staff, her hands at its middle ready to swat him with either end.

"Please, madam," said Lin Po. "We mean him no harm. We are seeking only the truth."

She made a sign with her fingers to ward off the evil eye and lowered her staff. "He off to town. Today be market day. You go to town, find his truck, there he be. Now get off my property!"

But when they returned to the Land Rover, Lin Po noticed a doll, woven from straw, dangling from the grille. The doll was as long as his forearm, and it wore a conical hat woven from fresh green grass.

Long sharp thorns pierced the doll's arms and legs.

The two spent the night at the ambassador's farmhouse. In the morning they spoke with the farm manager, who told them one thing that might help. "It happened just before seven. We heard his shotgun, five shots, spaced one after the other as if he were shooting skeet. I sent a boy to the field to see if his excellency needed a bearer. He ran back with the terrible news."

"And where is that shotgun now?" asked Callahan. But nei-

ther the manager nor his crew could answer.

At the farmhouse, a single story of high-ceilinged masonry with shady porches on all four sides, they got much the same story from the housemaid and the cook.

"He must have taken the shotgun because it is not locked in the cabinet," said the one. The other, after much babble about witches and spirits, said, "He heard baboons in the bananas and our watchdogs barking. He leaped up from the table and grabbed the gun, leaving his breakfast to cool, and drove up the hill road."

"At what time was that?" asked Lin Po.

"He sat down at the same time every morning," said the cook. "The ambassador was always punctual. Breakfast promptly at six, rain or shine, no matter if he was up half the night entertaining. He had only just sugared his coffee when the baboons barked."

Again the two policemen exchanged glances. Perhaps forty minutes between the ambassador's leaving and the five shots. Yet the victim was found not five minutes' drive from his farmhouse.

They filled the Land Rover with gasoline from the ambassador's supply, and Lin Po

signed a chit for it. He noticed that a small round cage made of splints now lay in the back, and the perky head of a black and white chicken bobbed up and down between the slats.

Callahan said, "Nearby is the kraal of the Divinity woman. Because of her age, she leased her farm to the ambassador and at a good price so she no longer needs to work. But she still has her fortune telling, which she does for free so as not to weaken her powers."

Divinity was at home, seated in the shade of a thatched roof that was supported by four bare poles. Her gaily patterned dress and skullcap were of matching orange, brown, and dusty blue stripes, and she played a thumb harp.

"Welcome, policeman!" she shouted. "You come my wedding? I make you very rich, you marry me!"

"How many husband you got already?" asked Callahan in patois. "Maybe your house be too crowded for honeymoon?"

"I got five husband," she cackled, "but three's dead and one run away to the army, so he don't count. The last, he too old and he drunk too much anyway."

"Maybe I marry you just a little bit today," laughed Callahan. "You treat me right, I be back tomorrow."

"You policeman all alike, want always something for nothing. Who this little man you bring? You marry too much maybe, little man?" She looked at Lin Po as she might have examined a fish at the market.

"This my friend, Lin Po. He bring you a chicken. Some person leave a doll on him. See?"

She took the doll in both hands and studied it front and back. Then she twisted one of the thorns, the one that pierced the doll's right arm. "That hurting you?" Her eyes were bright, and very black, almost youthful, in a face that might have seen seventy summers:

"No," said Lin Po.

She twisted another thorn, this one through the doll's leg. "You feel nothing, I think?"

"Nothing."

"Huh! I think this doll more for show, to scare tourist." She removed the four thorns and pulled off the grass hat. "Maybe we make a real doll, teach this dollmaker not to walk on another's grave."

An orange scarf was draped across her shoulders. She drew it to her lap to cover her hands and the doll. When she pulled the scarf away again, the doll was transformed. Its head was wrapped in black tape. It wore eyeglasses of twisted wire and a white garment that reached to its knees.

"You stop by the doctor today for sure, give him this doll. He be sick too much before he eat again." With a quick twist of her wrists, she broke the chicken's neck. It flopped and struggled under her arm, but she took a small knife and cut its neck, dripping the blood on the doll.

"Chastity?" she called, and a shrill voice answered. "You come. We got chicken for the pot." She threw the dying bird to the ground, where it kicked and jerked, making bloody circles in the dust.

The Land Rover drove off with Lin Po holding the doll on his lap, looking at the pattern of scarlet stains on the white jacket. With a little imagination they formed a Chinese ideograph.

The ideograph for death.

Callahan drove uphill, toward a mountain. "I think we shall pay a call on Pouladou. His sort needs to be reminded often that he is being watched, or he will grow bolder and start killing cats and apes again."

The poacher was the poorest of the poor. His shack was little more than a few sheets of bent and rusted iron for a roof held up by four poles, hidden well off the road. The sides were boards, and brush leaned against it, all the boards without nails and the door just a gap in the wall.

Pouladou was not at home. Either that or he had heard the Range Rover coming and slipped away.

"If you were this man," Callahan asked, "where would you hide an expensive shotgun?"

Lin Po smiled. "Knowing how the police are sometimes forgetful about warrants, and how they jump to conclusions, I would not hide it anywhere near my house."

Behind the shack Pouladou's latrine was a hole in the mud. A path, one of three leading into the jungle, went past the latrine to disappear in a riot of green things. Of the three, this path had seen the most use.

Callahan gave Lin Po his assault rifle and led the way up the path, his revolver cocked and ready. At a place where the path divided in two, he motioned for Lin Po to hide himself. "Wait here," he whispered. "I will send him to you."

The sergeant went up the path to the right, making enough noise for five men. Lin Po waited, listening to the strange voices of the jungle and trying not to swat flies or scratch himself. Then he heard the soft thump of bare feet and the swish of one who hurries through the bushes. Suddenly he was face to face with a small man who carried a shotgun and a battered rifle by the barrels over his shoulder.

"Halt!" shouted Lin Po, pointing his rifle. "Police! You are under arrest!" The little man dropped the weapons and covered his face with his hands.

Sergeant Callahan was not far behind. "Pouladou! You murdered the ambassador, stole his shotgun!" He said this in French as he fastened the man's hands with manacles.

Pouladou, of course, spoke no English, and further questions were asked in patois, which the sergeant interpreted for Lin Po's benefit:

"No! I kill nobody! Them baboon do it. I see the gun in the dirt, so I take it. I kill nobody."

"Where were you, for how long, and what else did you see? Speak, Pouladou, or you will hang for it."

"I hide up them palm tree, take my rifle. Maybe leopard come, for to take dead baboon, you know. Leopard skin bring much money."

"What did you see then?"

"Them baboon. Whole troop come, make racket too much. Ambassador drive up, try for to shoot from him truck. Baboon plenty too smart for him. Them see him shotgun, them run, hide in bananas."

"Him get out, come through gate. More close he get, more crazy them baboon. Then big one jump out and grab him like this, by the throat." He clutched

his own throat and made gagging noises, falling to the earth.

He looked up at the sergeant. "Never see baboon so mad. Ambassador fall down, drop him gun. Too many baboon run up, bite him, run off again. Then come doctor man."

"The doctor? But that was hours later."

"Not so." Pouladou got to his feet. "Might be him hide near this place, watch what happen. Him got can of pepper spray, drive baboon back. China man beg for help, but doctor spit on him. He take shotgun, shoot the sky, scare away them baboon."

"And what then?"

"He walk in them banana, leave China man to die. When he come by, he got little baboon on them chain. Baboon ride on him head, like parrot."

"A baboon on a chain? Are you sure?"

"Little one, plenty young, a cosset maybe. Doctor got long branch, make sweep like broom. Him walk turnaround up them hill, sweep away him foots."

"I take shotgun, run before police come."

Pouladou was made to ride in the back of the Land Rover chained to a steel eyebolt.

The noisy car bumped downhill in the direction from which they had come, and Lin Po held on with both hands. He would

not have said a word, not wanting to distract the sergeant from his driving, but it was the sergeant who led the discussion.

"The motive," he said, "and I am guessing, is the doctor's sister Joanna."

"Quite plausible," said Lin Po, inhaling sharply as a large pig darted across the road.

"We have a possible witness in Pouladou," said the sergeant, jerking his thumb toward the back seat. "He has testified before in order to lighten his own sentence. But he is not known for telling the truth, and the prosecutor would not move against the doctor with only the word of a poacher and thief as a witness."

"If what he has said is true, we have a problem indeed." Lin Po chose his words with care. "I cannot think of any reason why there should have been an accomplice, nor can I imagine another witness with an innocent excuse for being at the scene. Without a confession, I see little more evidence coming our way."

"Even if she knew anything, that Joanna would never talk." Callahan struck the steering wheel with a fist. "So near yet so far!"

"Take heart, my friend," Lin Po said. "We have not played our last cards. We must find our

only other possible witness, the pet baboon. And I shall attempt a modern version of the black arts. It is called psychology."

When they drove into the doctor's compound, the sun was straight overhead. The doctor waited at the door to his modest bungalow, a slight frown creasing his brow.

Lin Po approached him, the little straw doll in his hand. Very casually Sergeant Callahan walked around behind the clinic, where the goat shed and the henhouse sat.

"What have you there?" asked the doctor. He accepted the doll and gave a chuckle. "It looks like—it is! Someone plays a joke on me, a bad joke, if I may say so."

"Someone played such a joke on me as well," said Lin Po. "Fortunately it was ineffective, and our investigation proceeds."

"Hard at it, are you?" smiled the doctor. "Any luck?" He did not give the doll back but held it in both hands as if he feared it might break.

"Yes, actually. We are about to write our reports. We have found the killer, identified witnesses who have agreed to testify, and learned exactly when and how the murder took place, and why."

The doctor looked again at the doll. "Come out of this sun and

tell me all about it." But Lin Po grasped his arm and led him away from the house.

"One thing only remains. We must learn how the matter will end. Let us not go inside quite yet, doctor. A walk in the garden could prove edifying for both of us."

In the entire compound not one blade of grass survived; due to the persistence of the goats. The earth showed red-brown and dusty from one tree to the next. Chickens explored the odd corners and laid their eggs on the ground for delighted children to discover. Clumsy beetles rolled balls of dung to their lairs. Raucous birds screeched from the trees.

"It seems we have a choice of endings, doctor. We can pursue the usual sequence of pressing charges, awaiting the verdict of a grand jury, going through the annoyance and publicity of a trial. An expensive course, a burden for any emerging nation on the verge of civil war, and sure to cause a lurid sensation back home in Brussels.

"Or we can receive the signed confession of the killer, who would be allowed a few minutes alone in his pharmacy. The matter might then be hushed up except for certain records that must be set right. Of course, only a man of honor would be offered such a choice."

He looked into the Belgian's eyes. Just then Callahan came around the corner leading a small baboon on a chain.

"Ah," breathed Lin Po. "Here is our final witness, doctor. Your pet, I believe?"

The baboon seemed quite tame and delighted to see the doctor. "Joanna's," he said. "He came to us with a broken leg. I should have freed him when he was no longer needed, but I couldn't." The doctor's voice dropped to a near whisper. "I could not turn the little one loose in the wild. He is too gentle, too naive. His brothers would kill him if the leopard did not."

"Have you made your choice?" asked the sergeant.

The doctor sighed. "Joanna? Bring me a blank sheet of paper, will you, dear? And then—take the truck to the Dewars' and bring back five gallons of cow's milk. Here are the keys."

"But I have just laid out your lunch," she protested.

"Do it!" he snapped. Then he erased his frown with a smile, kissed her cheek, and watched her leave until she and the truck and the dust it made were out of sight.

They sat in the shade of his verandah sipping homemade wine while the doctor wrote out his confession. Then he went in to his pharmacy, sat down on

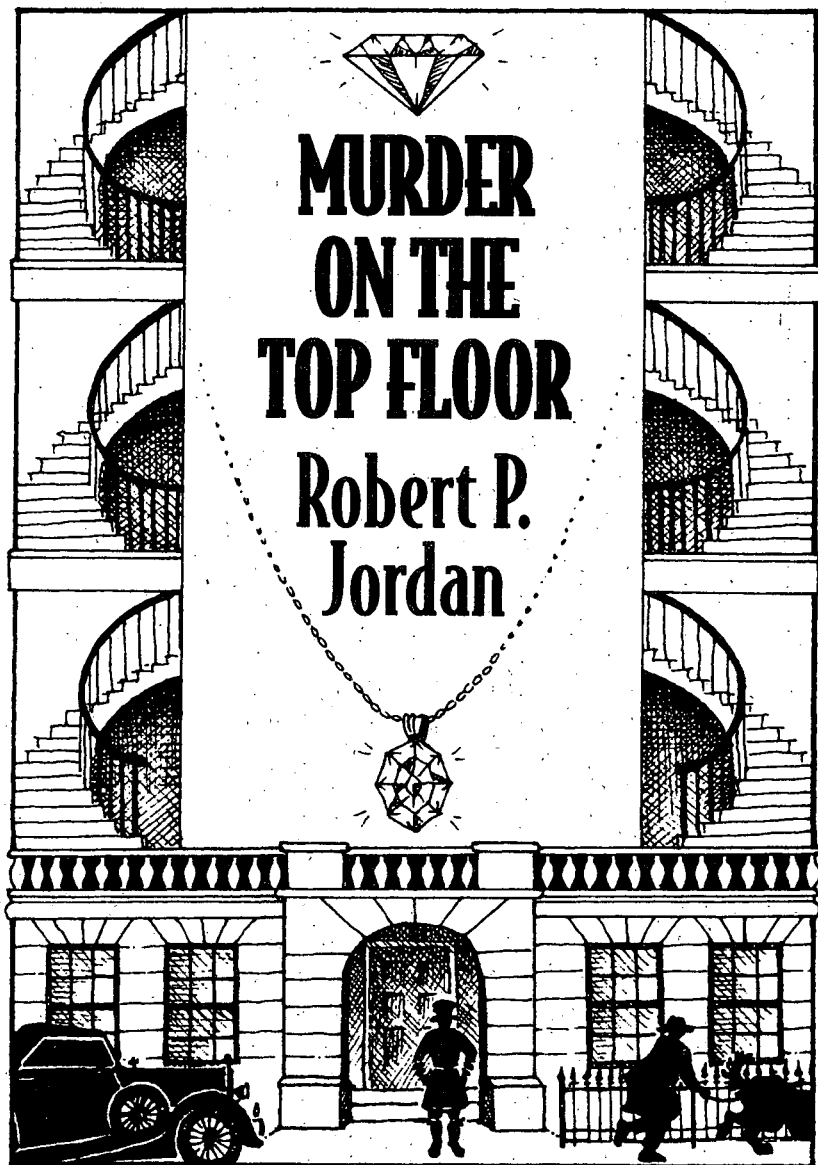
the floor, and injected himself with five milliliters of concentrated potassium chloride.

Near the syringe lay the little

bloodstained doll. The clock stood at half past noon, and just as Divinity predicted, he had not yet eaten.

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THE CRIMINAL MIND

“Tea, sir?”

Though hardly louder than a whisper, the voice of Police Constable Gregory Stone caused Detective Inspector Ian McEwen to start. He'd been doing what he'd admonished the men in his ad hoc command not to do—doze off. That Ian thought this surveillance mission was most likely a waste of time didn't help his concentration a whit.

From where he sat on the wooden bench bolted to the inside of their enclosed van, Ian reached for the proffered stone-ware mug. Stone poured out two other mugs of tea and carried one to the front of the vehicle. After passing it to Police Constable Sergeant Neville Wolfe seated in the cabin, P.C. Stone went back to his seat on the bench, gathered a blanket about his shoulders, and cupped his hands around the remaining mug for its minuscule warmth.

Ian had set up a schedule so that the men rotated between their stations outside in the long winter's darkness and time inside the van. He himself had just come in for a short break, and Stone was about to return to the near-freezing temperatures of mid-December, 1934. Another constable, George Miller, remained outside in the pre-dawn murk of London.

None of the policemen was in

uniform, and even McEwen had shed his usual tweed coat and tie for a workingman's shirt, a wool jumper, and his old army battledress jacket. Warmth and comfort reigned over fashion and protocol for the men parked outside The Crocker Arms, a high-class seven story block of flats near Regent's Park.

Every person who entered or left the building was noted in a log. Crime was a rare visitor to such a well-heeled neighborhood. But after several months of cat burglaries on the north side of the city, the powers at Scotland Yard were reacting to an informant's tip that a Crocker Arms resident was next on the burglar's list. Ian put little faith in informants. In his experience most of them gave false or grossly incomplete information for monetary gain or favorable treatment from the police. But he thought it best to keep his mouth shut and follow orders just as the constables, relieved of their normal duties and assigned to the case, knew to do.

He squinted at his pocket watch in the van's dim interior. It was nearly a quarter past seven; the sun would rise by eight. Since it was unlikely that the burglar would strike in daylight, his crew was off duty until nine that evening. But before he went home to catch a few hours' sleep, he had to wrestle with

some of the burgeoning paper-work back at the Yard.

Ian gave his men no outward sign of the anger seething within him. Not only had the surveillance duty taken him away from cases that demanded his attention, but he had also seen his wife and sons for less than an hour in each of the last three days. Added to that was his annoyance at missing two of his thrice-weekly rides aboard Tomalin, a gelding owned by the exclusive Chesterton Club, whose stable he was permitted to use. For the erstwhile horse artilleryman, whose only physical recreation was his riding, it was a tough throw of the dice to be assigned to such a mission.

He took a sip of tea and made a face. "I'd drop a quid for a good hot cup of coffee, Stone."

"Aye, sir. This ruddy stuff tastes like . . ."

Before Stone could finish his rejoinder, Sergeant Wolfe exclaimed, "Hello! What the bugger . . . look at this, sir."

Ian, bending low so his six foot three inch frame could negotiate the van's cramped box, went forward and knelt beside Wolfe. Peering through the smudged windscreen, he focused thirty yards ahead on The Crocker Arms. The porter, costumed in a top hat and what appeared to be a bad copy of a Beefeater's uniform, had dashed out of the

lighted entrance and was jogging in aimless ovals in front of the building. After nearly a minute of such activity, he abruptly halted and leapt up and down while hailing someone out of Ian's line of sight.

"Some Yanks I knew during the Great War once told me about something they called locoweed. It makes animals go mad when they eat it," Ian said, a half-smile crinkling up the ends of the mustache worn to offset his prominent Roman nose and scarred cheek. "Perhaps our porter's discovered a supply here in England." Before the policemen's chuckles faded, a uniformed constable ran over to the porter and put a hand on his shoulder to calm him. After a brief exchange of words, they both dashed inside.

"Should one of us go see what it's about, sir?"

"Not yet. It may be a resident with some medical problem. The constable or the manager will call the appropriate people. We'll only give ourselves away if, on the odd chance, the burglars we're after are skulking about."

During the next few minutes, two more constables trotted up to The Crocker Arms and entered. A handful of the building's residents, some still in dressing gowns, appeared in the downstairs lobby. Even at that

distance, through the double front glass doors, Ian and his men could see them in animated conversations. When newcomers arrived and were told about whatever event had caused their congregating, several brought hands to their mouths as if horrified.

"Someone must be dead," said Wolfe matter-of-factly. "Heart seizure or apoplexy maybe."

"Some bloke prob'ly slipped in his tub and bashed his head in," intoned Stone.

"Two to one it's a suicide," said Wolfe. "That, or a jealous husband's shot his wife's lover."

The two constables kept tossing out conjectures, each more unlikely than the one before it, until Ian raised his hand. "Gentlemen, your collective fancy is most impressive. But we have no facts. We'll wait this out a bit longer."

Vehicles began to arrive at The Crocker Arms. First was a black automobile; two additional constables and a man dressed in a dark overcoat got out. Ian recognized the latter as Lucas Terwillegar, a policeman with limited imagination but dogged disposition. Like Ian, Terwillegar had recently been promoted to detective inspector from the ranks of the uniformed constabulary. Unlike McEwen, he was still on probationary status.

Minutes later a second black

automobile and an ambulance drew up. Ian observed aloud that since the ambulance wasn't sounding its warning bell, the incident wasn't life-threatening or the person involved was beyond human assistance.

"Blimey, sir. It's Inspector Berglin," Wolfe muttered. The dapper Sir Michael Berglin stepped from the car and strode purposefully into The Crocker Arms. Berglin, who was unmarried, routinely arrived at work early and left late. He had probably been in his office when the call came in. Yet he sallied forth only for capital crimes or those involving the peerage.

"Must be serious if Berglin's come round," Stone said.

More passersby stopped to gawk through the front doors. Two constables were dispatched from within the building to push the growing throng back from the entrance. He sighed. "Looks as though half of London knows what's afoot, but we don't. I doubt any potential thieves will notice me in that mob. Wolfe, continue logging anyone besides police and ambulance attendants who enters or exits. Stone, go bring Miller in. There's no reason he should suffer the cold any longer. I'm going to see if I can speak to Sir Michael."

His feet crunched on the heavy frost as he cut across the grass at the edge of Regent's

Park. In that way, he didn't approach The Crocker Arms directly from the van, which was partly hidden by several tall evergreens next to the park's access road. Crossing Prince Albert Road a block down from the building, he made his way up to the curious onlookers and eased through them to one of the two constables at the entrance. Recognizing neither, he displayed his warrant and identity cards. As the bobby began to move to attention, he shook his head.

"I'm here on the q.t. Stand easy."

The constable nodded and stepped back to let him enter the building. Small clusters of partially dressed residents still remained in the lobby. The ambulance attendants, seated apart, were smoking cigarettes and waiting.

Dressed as he was, Ian kept his identity cards out should he meet another policeman he didn't know. But the next uniform he saw belonged to Police Constable Jack Lindley, with whom he had worked on a kidnapping case the previous May. Lindley stood at ease in front of a door marked STAIRS.

"Inspector McEwen! Word of this has gotten round quickly enough," the young blond bobby said with mild surprise.

"Actually I was in the vicinity on other business," Ian replied.

"I came over to see what the carry-on is about."

"It's murder, sir, plain and simple. Or so says Inspector Terwillegar. The body was found by the building manager on the top floor landing of this stairwell." Lindley indicated the door behind him.

"And what does Inspector Berglin say?"

"He's not said anything to me, sir."

"He's quite closemouthed at times," Ian said. "But I suspect that murder in a place like this may be plain but probably not simple."

"Aye, sir. The victim was killed with a . . ." Lindley broke off and stood to attention. Ian swung about to see Inspector Berglin striding briskly down the hallway with Terwillegar, face-flushed, at his heels. The frown of concentration on the senior inspector's face softened at the sight of McEwen, whom he considered his protégé.

"I was just about to send for you, McEwen, but you've anticipated my very move."

"I can't take credit for that, sir. I plead total ignorance." Voice lowered so none of the residents near them could overhear, he continued, "My men and I were on surveillance outside . . . those cat burglaries . . . when we noticed the commotion.

After you arrived, I thought I'd best check in."

"And a good thing you did, too. Of course you know Inspector Terwillegar." Ian and the probationer exchanged nods. Berglin rubbed his hands together. "What luck! Has anyone told you what's going on?"

Ian nodded toward the constable. "P.C. Lindley says it's murder on the top floor. He was about to tell me how it was done."

"Lindley's a sharp lad," Berglin said, loud enough for the constable to overhear the praise. "He was the second man on the scene, and he sealed off the lift and the near stairwell so the residents and staff couldn't muck up any evidence. He assumed, and I concur, that the murderer probably fled the building by way of one or the other."

"If he left."

"Lindley thought of that, too. The hallways, maintenance cupboards, and the like are being searched. But unless the perpetrator is also a resident, I think he's gone."

"And the perpetrator is a he?"

"When you see the body, you'll see why we're safe in that assumption. Come along. The laboratory chaps will check the lift first when they get here; then we'll be able to use it. For now, the far stairwell is our only ac-

cess. I hope you've retained some of your fitness from your years on foot patrol. Several flights await us." Here he turned to Terwillegar. "Sorry, Lucas. This'll be your third time up."

"Quite all right, sir," the probationer replied. His face had just begun to lose its ruddy hue from his previous exertions.

While the three inspectors climbed, Berglin gave McEwen a précis of the information so far uncovered. "The murdered man was Geoffrey Immroth, a jeweler and a wealthy one to boot. Perhaps there's a connection with your investigation, Ian. We found the body still warm in the unheated stairwell, so the crime was probably committed within the last two hours. The laboratory lads will, no doubt, determine a more exact time." Berglin's voice stayed steady and strong as they climbed.

Ian, however, was sucking air, as he and his chums had termed it, as badly as he ever had during his many cross-country runs in council school. He had quit school before finishing his final form in 1917 to enlist in the Royal Horse Artillery. The following years of soldiering, with their physical exertions and privations, then walking his beat as a constable, had kept him fairly fit. But riding Tomalin two or three times a week for an


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home. But get their logbook and bring it here."

After Terwillegar left, Berglin turned back to Ian, but the mustachioed inspector was squatting well down on his heels, scrutinizing the tiled floor. "Have you added contortionism to your repertoire of talents?" Berglin lowered himself as well. "Or have you spotted something?"

Ian unlimbered his right arm resting on his bent knees and pointed at the floor. "See there, sir? Black heelmarks not far from the railing, probably made when the killer pulled back on Immroth's neck from behind. The victim fought, but it was a static struggle, for the murderer pinned him against the railing. The marks, which are regular and sharp, are crescent-shaped. I would guess the murderer was wearing new shoes or shoes with new heels. Immroth, though otherwise lacking only his suit coat to be fully dressed, is wearing sheepskin slippers."

"And those heelmarks are significant?"

"Perhaps, in the context of all the clues we have here and those we find in his flat. In any case, I see neither blood on the floor nor marks on the walls such as you might find had Immroth managed to push his attacker about. No, I believe the garroter came up from behind,

applied the leash, and held him against the railing until Immroth collapsed and died. Then the attacker rifled his clothing looking for . . . jewels, perhaps?"

"Then Immroth was taken by surprise?"

"Or caught off-guard by someone he trusted enough to enter a stairwell with and then turn his back." Ian strained his eyes as he looked again at the body. "I wish I could get a bit closer, but I suppose we ought to follow procedure and wait for the laboratory chaps."

"I asked Ramey to meet me at Immroth's flat with a key. We might be able to find something in there," Berglin suggested. Carefully keeping to the outside of the landing, the two men left the stairwell and walked down the hallway to wait outside number 627. After a few moments Berglin began to tap his foot impatiently. "I suppose I could send the constable down to see what's become of Ramey."

"Have you tried the door, sir?"

"Why, er, no. I assumed it was locked."

Ian reached inside his battle-dress and retrieved a handkerchief. Draping it over the door-knob, he turned it, the latch retracted, and he pushed the door open on silent hinges. "I hope the St. Bernard is friendly," he whispered to Berglin.

Taking a few steps across the

threshold, he spotted a blanket just inside on the floor, probably used for the dog's bed. But the only living things in evidence were some houseplants on a glass-topped table near a window and a rather large tiger-striped cat sitting among them. The cat's green eyes were remarkably calm as if the sudden entrance of strangers to its domicile was quite an ordinary event. Ian slowly held out his cupped hand, palm down, toward the animal. The cat sniffed at it delicately, then bumped his head and face over Ian's knuckles. Attached to the cat's collar was a silver metal capsule as great around as Ian's index finger and half its length. With the cat's every movement it clicked lightly against the collar's buckle.

"Affectionate thing," Berglin observed. "No dog?" His question was immediately answered by a series of stentorian woofs coming from farther back in the flat. Berglin retreated; the abrupt motion, rather than the barking, caused the cat to cringe beneath Ian's hand.

Leaving Berglin at the door, Ian disappeared down the hall, then promptly returned. "It's shut up in a back room." Relief was evident on his superior's face. He's afraid of dogs, Ian thought incredulously. "Perhaps I should contact someone at the

RSPCA to come round and take charge of the animals until we can contact Immroth's next of kin?"

"Right-o. I'll go ring them up while you look about. Perhaps I'll be able to find out what's happened to Ramey." With that, Sir Michael was gone.

Ian fought off the desire to laugh at the incongruity of a man with Berglin's physical courage being afraid of a dog, albeit a large one. It was only last May during the kidnapping case that Berglin had been wounded trying to apprehend a fugitive whom he knew to be armed.

"I say, so it's Immroth who's been done away with, eh?" The deep voice came from the open door. Ian turned and saw a distinguished-looking gentleman of about sixty with a ruddy complexion and a white goatee. The beard, Ian thought ruefully, probably compensated for the lack of hair on top of his head. He was dressed in a satin smoking jacket over brown houndstooth check trousers. Appropriately enough, he was smoking a pipe.

"Sir. And you would be . . . ?" Ian inquired.

"Clarence Chalmers. Colonel Clarence Chalmers, retired these last ten years from the Twelfth Royal Fusiliers." The man smiled as they shook



hands. "And despite your rough attire, I assume you are a policeman. I live . . . lived, rather, next to Immroth. Number 625."

"Did you hear or see anything of a violent nature this morning, sir?"

"Nothing at all. Nary a sound from the dog. I heard no noise from Immroth's flat last evening, either. But it wasn't unusual for a visitor to arrive well after midnight. I suppose it had to do with his business. I could tell when someone was new to Immroth's flat, though—the dog barks at strangers. It was only when Fitzhugh Ramey raised the alarm this morning that I knew anything was amiss."

"Did you know Immroth well?"

"Hardly at all, I'm afraid. Secretive chap. But then one of the blessings of this country is the right to be left alone. When we did talk, it was about old Brutus and Lady Jane." At Ian's questioning look, "His St. Bernard and the cat. Immroth and I usually spoke only when we passed in the hallway or shared the lift when he was taking Brutus to work or out for a walk. I got on better with the dog than I did the man."

"He took the St. Bernard to his shop?"

"Yes. Seems a bit odd, but if you're the sole owner of a business, you can do what you bloody well please, I suppose."

"I thought a hired man came round and walked dogs in this building."

"You'll have to ask Ramey for the particulars, but I think the arrangement is strictly between the dog owners and the man. It isn't a service of this block of flats as far as I know. He shows up Monday through Friday mornings between six and seven and takes several of the residents' dogs out on privy parade in the park. I've watched him from my window making a number of trips each morning. He'll take several smaller dogs at one time, then the larger ones two at a time. Because of Brutus's size, he takes him alone."

"Vicious?"

"Not at all. Listen. He recognized my voice and calmed down."

The dog had indeed ceased barking and was scratching at the door. "We'll have to get him out of the room to search it. Inspector Berglin has gone to call the RSPCA."

"I'd be pleased to take Brutus until the Society representative arrives. My dalmatian bitch, Flossie, died two years ago. It would be pleasant to have a canine companion again if only for a short time. Let's find his leash, and I'll take him to my flat."

Ian stood dumb. The leash was evidence that could not be disturbed, and he wasn't about



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for exercise and more for allowing the dogs to relieve themselves, sir," Ian answered, smiling when Berglin crinkled up his face at the thought.

"Plausible, sir."

"Sir, I'm sure you're correct that the dogwalker has something to do with Immroth's death, but to what extent I don't know without further information."

The two men heard the muffled whirr of the lift's motor as it ascended to the top floor. The squad of men from Scotland Yard's laboratory emerged with their equipment valises and split wordlessly into two smaller teams. One group headed for the near stairwell and Immroth's body. The other entered the dead man's flat. Trailing this second group was a thin, bald-

"I suspect these morning excursions into the park are less

ing, pinched-faced fop brandishing a lorgnette.

"Berglin, this is intolerable! All these men have my residents in an uproar. I know this is murder, but can't you be just a bit more discreet?"

Sir Michael turned slightly toward Ian. "Ramey. I'll deal with him. You get some sleep, follow your instincts, and report back to me at the Yard by five this afternoon."

Ian nodded and left. He stood in the hallway and watched the activity at the stairwell's entrance. What he needed to know about the body would be written up in the preliminary laboratory report.

Riding down in the lift, he wondered why Immroth's body had been so rudely searched though his flat showed no signs of being disturbed. Perhaps the garroter had found what he was looking for on Immroth. But why, then, had Brutus been sequestered in the bedroom? Ian could think of no other reason than to get the dog out from underfoot. Then there was the question mark beside Constable Miller's last entry in the logbook. But Ian would let the constable have a few hours of sleep before he queried him about it.

Stepping out of the lift, he walked into the nearly deserted lobby. If, as Ramey had stated, the residents were in an uproar,

their roaring was taking place elsewhere. Fishing out his pocket watch, he noted that more than an hour had passed since the porter first drew Sergeant Wolfe's attention. Perhaps the porter had some information about the dogwalker.

Ian flashed a grin at Lindley as he passed the near stairwell entrance, then went out the front double doors. The top-hatted porter looked suspiciously at Ian's workingman's attire, so he again displayed his credentials.

"Sorry, guv," the porter responded. "But the clothes . . ."

"Aye. It's a disguise of sorts. Was it you who found Immroth's body?"

"Oh no, sir. Mr. Ramey did soon after I come on duty 'ere at the door. 'E makes 'is rounds early ever' mornin', lookin' to see the charwoman's done 'er work."

"Does that include cleaning the stairwells?"

"Oh, aye. Ever' Monday Fanny cleans 'em. These be rich folk 'ere, but they do muck up the buildin' somethin' awful. They know us workin' folk'll clean up after 'em."

"Speaking of working folk, what do you know about the man who comes around and walks dogs each morning?"

"Think 'e might o' seen some-thin'? Well, I only know 'im as

Colin. Don't know 'is last name. Mr. Ramey might. Anyroad, this Colin finishes 'is dogwalkin' by the time I get out front 'ere. Come 'n' gone most days, so's I don't talk with 'im 'cept when 'e's runnin' late."

From watching the routine the day before, Ian already knew the porter came on duty at seven and was relieved by another similarly costumed man at four in the afternoon. From midnight until seven the next morning the front doors were left unattended while other doors on the ground floor were locked from the outside. According to the logbook, Colin had left after seven. "Like this morning?"

"Aye, guv. I s'pose 'e was late 'cause 'e left in a flash. My back was to 'im when 'e came out the door. Just dashed by, and said naught. But then 'e turned left and went up Prince Albert Road instead o' right, where 'e's got more dogs to walk."

Ian's eyes narrowed. "You say he walks dogs at more than just this block of flats?"

"Oh, aye. Told me once 'e 'as two more buildin's down the road, but I don't know which they be."

Ian frowned as he looked southwest along Prince Albert Road where the early morning traffic was thickening. "There must be a dozen blocks of flats

between here and the Public Gardens," he murmured.

"Aye. You might still find 'im out in Regent's Park walking them dogs, or you can come round in the mornin' if you need to speak with 'im."

Ian pondered the suggestion. If Colin the Dogwalker had killed Geoffrey Immroth, he would not have continued his routine that morning as if nothing had happened. Rather, he would have tried to make his escape from London or gone underground. But if Colin were not involved, Ian could pick him up for questioning on the morrow when he appeared at The Crocker Arms for his first lot of dogs.

"Tomorrow's soon enough," Ian said. After obtaining a physical description of the dogwalker from the porter, he thanked him for his help.

A twelve hour shift already behind him, Ian walked across the street to the park and sat down wearily on the nearest bench. With the sun behind him, he tipped his head back to gaze up at the edifice of The Crocker Arms and studied the texture and consistency of the building's structure. It yielded precious few handholds on its smooth granite face even for an experienced climber. The other burglaries were all preceded by unlawful entry via an outside window. If the informant's tip

had been accurate, and the thief were the killer, then his modus operandi had changed. But then there was the dogwalker to complicate matters.

The morning sun illuminated the interiors of flats with open curtains, and he could see the laboratory men shifting about in Immroth's rooms. He spotted Berglin and Ramey in a lively discussion, probably over some point of Scotland Yard's decorum. In the next flat, Ian could see Colonel Chalmers speaking to someone below the inspector's line of sight. Then Brutus rose up on his hind legs and rested his front paws on Chalmers' shoulders, much to the delight of the retired officer. Perhaps the RSPCA might not have to look too far to find a new home for the huge dog, Ian thought.

He did not need to scurry about London making inquiries concerning Colin the Dogwalker's last name. Berglin would get it from Ramey if the manager knew it. And if not, he would give Lucas Terwillegar the task of finding it out. The probationer's dogged disposition would be of immeasurable help in searching records and canvassing informants for the whereabouts of a short, strong-armed burglar by the name of Colin. It was mind-numbing drudgery but just the ticket for Terwillegar.

With his van sent back to the

Yard, Ian had to take the underground home. Ezme, his wife of fifteen years, worked part-time as treasurer/secretary for St. Thomas Anglican Church while their sons were at school. With their flat empty, Ian could trade four hours of functioning like an automaton at work for the same amount of time asleep at home. When Ezme returned from her job at St. Thomas, he would drive their dilapidated car to the place where he could do his best thinking—sitting on one of the Chesterton Club's horses on the crest of a hillock overlooking Grave's End Heath.

Ian met Ezme dashing out their front door and only had time to kiss her hello and then again goodbye. Delaying just long enough to shed his clothes and set the alarm clock for one forty-five, he collapsed on the bed and was asleep in seconds.

One of the reasons Ian preferred to ride early in the morning was that he could have his pick of the Chesterton Club's horses. After riding his favorite, Tomalin, for an hour, he brought the animal back long before any of the club's members, most of them peers living off their inheritances, had risen from their beds. But his normal schedule had gone awry since he'd been assigned to the sur-



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veillance team. And on this unseasonably warm Tuesday afternoon, one of the club members had taken Tomalin out for a ride just before Ian presented himself to the stableman, Willie Vine. Willie recommended a new mare that the club had recently purchased. Her granddam had been a Percheron, and according to Vine, she was bought to allow some of the club's more rotund members to partake of the sport of equitation.

Ian approached any new horse with caution, but the mare turned out to be obedient and willing. Her draft horse lineage showed clearly in her stocky conformation, but she was strong and surefooted, and possessed not a small amount of speed over a short distance. Ian had a pleasant ride culminating in a climb to the crest of the hillock overlooking the club. He sat the mare there for ten minutes, while he pondered the Immroth case.

A few hours of sleep and a ride out on the heath had refreshed him, but he had gained few insights beyond those he had taken away with him from The Crocker Arms. As he worked the case over in his mind, more questions popped up. Ian could but guess at the victim's exact size, for he had only seen him crumpled up against the stairwell railing. Yet Immroth ap-

peared to be close to six feet in height and a dozen stone or more in weight. Though surprised by his attacker, he was large enough to have fought back against Colin the Dogwalker. From the porter's description and his own recollection of the man, Ian knew the suspect to be just over five feet tall and of slender build. Colin would make an unlikely garroter.

Ian's attention was drawn to the stables, where Willie Vine, himself standing only three inches above five feet, hoisted a club member aboard a tall Thoroughbred cross. Ian smiled. The ex-jockey was fifty years old but still hearty. He would conduct a test using his shorter friend. With a nudge from one knee and slight lift of the reins, Ian signaled the mare to walk down the hillock and back to the stables. He stripped off the tack and had given her a quick brush when Willie appeared from inside the sectioned-off portion of the stables where he resided.

"Ah, Willie. I was wondering if you'd help me with a problem."

Willie smiled broadly. He had assisted Ian in several past cases, usually by applying common sense to some sticky question stumping the tall inspector. "For certain I can help."

They shifted to the tack room, where Ian doffed his coat and hat, tossed them over a saddle

stand, and took a spare stirrup leather from a peg on the wall. "I'm going to lean over this stand as if I were looking down over a stairwell railing. You'll come up behind me and throw the leather over my head and round my neck as if you were trying to choke me. Pull back, but take care. I don't fancy explaining a strange bruise on my neck to Ezme."

Willie's first two attempts ended with both men laughing when the stirrup leather only bumped the back of Ian's head. On the third try, he managed to loop it around the policeman's forehead. And even when Vine was successful on the fourth trial, the leather slipped down past Ian's neck and over one of his shoulders.

"'Tis too hard. A bad angle, that, when you bend for'd. With practice, Ian, I'd prob'ly be more ac'rate," the stableman said.

"True. An experienced garrotter would have better luck. But unless the dog leash was left behind as a false clue, I'd think the killer would have used his own garrote. Something thin and strong with knots in it so he could easily crush the larynx of his victim. Using an unfamiliar piece of smooth leather, the killer would be risking a botched job. Let's say you had gotten the strap round my neck on the first try, Willie, could you have held

on for three minutes or longer in order to asphyxiate me if I thrashed about?"

"Nay, Ian. You'd've flung me about like a rat in a terrier's mouth."

Ian sat down on an upturned empty horseshoe keg. "It seems, Willie, that this case is not so straightforward as others at the Yard first suspected."

**"T**here was just somethin' that struck me as odd 'bout the man when he went back inside the buildin', sir," Police Constable George Miller said over the telephone to McEwen. Upon reaching his cramped, dimly lit office after leaving the Chester-ton Club, Ian had rung up the constable at his home. Miller's question mark in the logbook had puzzled Ian since Berglin had pointed it out.

There was silence over the line as Miller pondered his reasons. "Aye, sir. If I remember right, 'twas somethin' 'bout his hat and gloves."

"Hat and gloves?"

"Aye, sir. When the man left the buildin' with that ruddy big dog, I swear he was wearin' fingerless gloves and a light brown tweed cap. By then, sir, I'd seen him leave and return several times with t'other dogs. But when he dashed back inside

with the St. Bernard, he was wearin' gloves with fingers and a tan cap pulled low o'er his face. The cap was the same shape, but lighter in color. The gloves didn't bother me so much, seein' as a man could have another pair in his pocket. But most men don't norm'ly carry two hats, you see."

"Anything else odd about him?" Ian inquired.

"Aye, there was. But I can't put my finger on 't. I turned the logbook o'er to Sergeant Wolfe and left for my surveillance post on t'other side of the buildin' fore the man came back outside. I just put that question mark down and left. I would've pointed it out earlier to you, sir, but all hell broke loose fore I could."

Ringin' off, Ian looked at his pocket watch. He had time to jot down a few ideas in his notebook before making his way through the mazelike hallways of Scotland Yard to a renovated wing of the London Metropolitan Police complex wherein Inspector Berglin spent most of his working hours. Berglin's office was the antithesis of Ian's: spacious, well-lit, comfortable. But Berglin had proved his mettle to the Yard's administration many times. His title and knighthood notwithstanding, he had earned his perquisite.

Mrs. Applebee, Berglin's sec-

retary, waved Ian on through the open door to the senior inspector's inner office.

"Ah, Ian. Right on time. Close the door, will you?" Berglin said as he paced to and fro before his monolithic desk. Ian and Lucas Terwillegar, who sat in the one leather upholstered side chair in the sparsely furnished office, exchanged nods. The probationer looked uncomfortable in Berglin's presence. Ian stood at ease just inside the door.

Berglin stopped abruptly and faced him. "Terwillegar thinks we have the case wrapped up. All except for apprehending the suspect, of course. And I find it difficult to argue against his hypothesis."

"So you believe it's the dog-walker?" Ian asked Terwillegar.

"Certainly. Who else could it be?"

"Lay your facts out, Lucas," Berglin said.

Terwillegar cleared his throat and began. "Each flat in The Crocker Arms is fitted with a small, key-operated wall safe, which, by-the-bye, is of such poor quality that I'd not keep valuables in it. When Fitzhugh Ramey showed us where it was in Immroth's spare bedroom, the key was in the lock. There were some papers scattered about inside. But if there were any jewels in the safe, the thief must have gotten away with them."

"Also in this spare room were some tools and equipment for cutting and mounting jewels in settings," Berglin added.

"So it would appear," Ian said, "that Immroth took work home with him, eh?"

"Yes. I'll have a talk with Immroth's shop manager to see if any of the inventory is missing," Berglin replied. "Perhaps that will give us a lead as to what jewels might have been taken from the safe."

"Did you identify the dogwalker?" Ian asked.

"According to Ramey, his name is Colin Drinkwater," Terwillegar said. "He spent two years in Reigate Prison for theft. He was released in May, year before last, and we've found no record of further wrongdoing. A year ago he married a widow, an Elsie—" here Terwillegar referred to his notebook "—let's see . . . her previous name was Sackett. Her two children came along in the bargain," he added as he slapped his notebook shut. "So you see, Drinkwater is a convicted felon in search of better things than walking dogs for a few quid a month. He knew Immroth was a jeweler, saw his chance, and took it. It's as simple as that. And we found his thumbprint on the metal nameplate on the dog leash, which puts the seal to it."

Berglin spoke. "We inter-

viewed Mrs. Drinkwater, and she claims her husband got a day job; he left London this morning with a lorry driver to pick up a load of fish at Bristol. According to her, he won't be back until early tomorrow morning, just in time to walk his clients' dogs."

"I think he's hooked it and left the wife and kiddies behind," Terwillegar said. "Of course we've sent his description to all stations. The net is out. We'll have him in a day or two at most."

"Then Colin has no regular job?" Ian asked.

"No one will hire an ex-convict on a regular basis. The family lives off his odd jobs and the washing she takes in," Berglin replied. He sat down on the edge of his orderly desk. "We also checked on Mrs. Drinkwater, but she has no record with the police." He folded his arms and looked expectantly at McEwen. "So, Ian, what can you add to what we've learned today?"

"The more I think about this case, the more questions I end up asking myself. At first glance it does appear that Drinkwater is our man. He had opportunity and motive. When he returned Brutus to his owner this morning, he could have asked Immroth to accompany him to the stairwell on some pretext, surprised him with the

leash, and choked him to death. Then he searched the body for the key to the safe, opened it, and absconded with any jewels kept inside. Brutus wouldn't have raised an alarm because he knows Drinkwater."

"Then where is the problem?" Terwillegar asked.

"I may be able to point that out if I can study the preliminary laboratory report."

"On my desk behind me," Berglin replied with a nod over his shoulder. "Drinkwater's criminal file is there, too, along with your logbook."

Ian walked over to the huge desk and opened the files. As he read, Berglin and Terwillegar exchanged quizzical looks. Both noted the half-smile on his lips when he finished. "It's as I thought," he said. "It could not have been Colin Drinkwater."

"And why not?" Terwillegar asked.

"The physical evidence and facts don't support it. Immroth, according to the lab report, is only an inch short of six feet tall, weighed nearly twelve stone, and appeared in good health. The smooth dog leash was looped over his neck from behind; he died from asphyxiation. His neck wasn't broken, nor was his larynx entirely crushed, only pressed shut until he died from lack of oxygen. It would take a man of at least equal size and

greater strength to pin him to the railing long enough to cause that. There should have been more of a struggle than was evidenced at the murder scene if a man as small as Drinkwater had been the garroter. As for Colin's thumbprint on the leash, you would expect that because he walked the dog almost daily."

"Drinkwater is thirty, Immroth was over fifty," Terwillegar countered. "A young man can overpower an older one."

"Drinkwater is also only five two, according to our records, and weighs ten stone. That fits the description I obtained from the porter at The Crocker Arms. Even a minimally competent barrister could show in court that Drinkwater is an unlikely culprit in this murder."

Frustrated, Terwillegar jumped up from the chair and turned his back on the other two men in the room. Ian looked at Berglin, who let a slight smile cross his lips for a few seconds. As detective inspectors both he and McEwen had been in similar straits; they knew what it was like when a hastily built hypothesis dissolved before the facts. "Sorry, sir, but it looks like my effort is wasted." The probationer spoke quietly.

"Not at all, Lucas," Berglin said. "You've done an admirable job with the groundwork. Ian has foiled many a theory of my

own since our first case together. Now I suggest we let Ian have his say, then we'll put together a plan of action by consensus, eh?"

At a motion from Berglin, Ian told them about P.C. Miller's observations. "Granted, it was ten hours into a tedious shift, but Miller was quite precise about the differences in dress between the man who left The Crocker Arms with Brutus and the one who returned with the dog. Something else about the man was amiss, but he couldn't say what it was." Ian clasped his hands behind his back and walked slowly in a small circle in the center of the room. He stopped. "That something was that the man who brought Brutus back, although similarly dressed, was a larger man than Colin Drinkwater."

"And who might this second man be?" Berglin asked.

Ian smiled. "The ultimate question, sir. The porter didn't suspect it was anyone other than Drinkwater, so interviewing him would be of no further use. Drinkwater himself may be the only one who can give us that information. I don't know much about Colin Drinkwater, but I wouldn't think he'd let a complete stranger return Brutus to Immroth and thereby risk alienating a client."

"Then if Mrs. Drinkwater's

tale of her husband's helping that lorry driver is true," Terwillegar said, "it's likely he doesn't know about the murder or his being a suspect."

"What do you propose we do, Ian?"

"I think we should be back at The Crocker Arms at six tomorrow morning to await Drinkwater's arrival for his daily parade of dogs in Regent's Park."

"Would you concur with this plan?" Berglin asked Terwillegar, and the probationer nodded. "Then I will meet both of you at Immroth's at five thirty sharp. I've posted a constable outside the flat for the time being. Now I bid you both a good evening."

Ian left the Yard and drove to the Drinkwaters' address, which he had noted in Colin's file. He had not mentioned it to Sir Michael, but the name Elsie Sackett was familiar to him. In a city as large as London, he suspected there were many Elsie Sacketts. But a face to match the name had a permanent place in Ian's memory from his days as a constable on patrol in Newington. Every part of London, however replete with fashionable restaurants and expensive shops, had its poorer sections. His old beat in Newington was one, and where the Drinkwaters lived in Shoreditch was another.



Though she possessed a fair measure of both, Ian vividly remembered Elsie Sackett not for her beauty or charm, but for her first husband, David. The man was a drunkard who beat Elsie twice while Ian was assigned to their neighborhood in Newington. After the first occurrence, he gave Sackett a civil, if stern, warning that he wouldn't tolerate further assaults on either Elsie or their children.

Not a week passed before Ian saw Elsie's face, bruised anew, at the window of the Sacketts' ground floor cold-water flat. Police Constable McEwen pondered his options overnight. The next morning the Sackett flat was his first stop.

Elsie let him in at his knock. He told her he wanted a private word with David, then gave her a half-crown, claiming he'd found it on the street. He suggested she collect the two toddlers and take them down to the corner greengrocer's to get some fresh fruit for their breakfast.

Elsie and the children were gone when Sackett came out of the w.c. Ian didn't let him finish pulling his braces over his shoulders before he grabbed him by the shirt front and slammed him against a wall. Having gained Sackett's full attention, in a measured voice Ian explained just what he would do to

Sackett if he ever again touched Elsie or his children in drunken anger or otherwise tried to escape his responsibilities as their provider. He also mentioned that Sackett should stand clear of the gin bottle in future and get to his job as a laborer for the gas works on time.

For weeks afterward, he worried that Sackett would complain to his superiors. Ian had, after all, far overstepped his authority. But there were no repercussions, and Elsie was never beaten again while Ian patrolled in Newington.

So it was that Ian once more knocked at Elsie's door. When she opened it, recognition built slowly in her light green eyes. Ian automatically searched her face for bruises, but her complexion was fair and unblemished. A slight bulge at her waist foretold a future mouth to feed in the Drinkwater home.

"Constable McEwen!" she exclaimed. Her utterance brought her two children, grown larger since last he saw them, scurrying forth from a small table in a corner of the kitchen to hide shyly behind their mother's skirt. The heavy smell of laundry starch singed by hot irons filled the room. "But it's Inspector McEwen, now, ain't it?"

"Hello, Mrs. Drinkwater. Yes, I was promoted up and away from Newington. I hadn't known

about David." Ian cleared his throat and lied, "I'm sorry to hear of it."

She shooed the children back to the table. "He was helpin' dig a ditch for a new gas line when it collapsed on him. 'Twas just after you left the neighborhood. David wasn't easy to live with, but he treated me fair after that chat you had with him. Would you like to come in?" she asked.

"I ought not intrude, ma'am. I just wanted to let you know that I'm on the case that brought round the other policemen earlier today."

"But Colin didn't have nothin' to do with it! Oh, he told me that an ex-convict'll always get rum treatment from coppers. We was startin' to do all right, what with him catchin' on as a day laborer at the Central Markets and his dogwalkin'. But now, just 'fore Christmas, this happens. If he don't get free o' this, the children and me'll be back on the streets again, just like we was when Colin took us in."

Tears glistened in her eyes. Ian rested his fingertips lightly on her shoulder, and was surprised at how thin it was. "I'll see that he's treated right enough. And don't be alarmed at anything you read or hear about the investigation. The newspapers often don't get the facts straight." He stepped back, nodding to her, and left.

Berglin peeked from behind the curtain of Immroth's living room window at the figure of Colin Drinkwater crossing Prince Albert Road from Regent's Park. Illuminated by streetlamps, he held the leashes of a poodle and an Alsatian from one of the floors below. "He should be here in a few moments to fetch Brutus," Berglin told Ian. Should Drinkwater attempt to flee when confronted by the inspectors at Immroth's door, Terwillegar and a constable were positioned in the shadows across the street from The Crocker Arms.

Ian remained seated, Lady Jane curled up and purring on his lap. The RSPCA had apparently not yet come for her. He set the cat aside and joined Berglin when he heard a knock at the front door. The senior inspector opened it, revealing a short, slender man in a much-patched canvas coat, fingerless gloves, and a brown tweed cap. Colin Drinkwater looked up at the two men in puzzlement but not alarm.

"Sorry, guv. Thought this was Mr. Immroth's flat." He backed up a step and looked at the number above the ornate transom and then back at the two men.

"It is the *late* Mr. Immroth's flat," Berglin said, bringing out

his warrant and identity cards. "Detective Inspector Berglin of Scotland Yard."

"Late? He's dead?"

"Didn't you know? Yesterday morning you were one of the last people to see him alive. And owing to your previous criminal record, some at the Yard think you're the prime suspect in his murder."

Drinkwater took another step back and looked toward the lift; he'd left the doors open for a quick return with Brutus. "Don't think of it, Colin," Ian said. "Trying to escape would surely mark you as the criminal."

Despair shone clearly in Drinkwater's face. "You'd not believe an ex-convict, anyroad."

"Inspector McEwen here thinks you let another man return Brutus to Immroth yesterday."

Colin's mouth worked wordlessly for a moment before he blurted out, "How'n bloody hell did you know 'bout that?"

"We do have our methods," Berglin replied, "His name, please."

"'Twas Billy Ross. Met him at Reigate Prison. He had a year more to go on his time when I got out. I ain't seen him till yesterday in Regent's Park. He come out of the dark suddenlike and scared an inch off me height, and I don't have that much to spare. We shared a

smoke under a streetlamp and talked a bit 'bout how we was gettin' on. He says he can't find no steady work, either, like me. Begged me, for old times' sake, to let him take Brutus back and collect the shillin'. Seemed odd 'cause he looked better off than me, wearin' good shoes and a new coat like mine. He never give a fig 'bout me when we was in stir together. But I agreed, knowin' first-hand how humbled an empty belly can make a man and seein' I had two other lots of dogs to walk 'fore I went to Central Markets to look for a day job. I was lucky to get one deliverin' a load o' fish most o' yesterday and into the night. Didn't finish unloadin' at the fishmonger's till an hour ago."

Berglin wrinkled his nose. "The odor emanating from your clothing is evidence enough of that. We'll check your alibi later, but for now, where can we find Ross?"

Drinkwater shrugged. "Don't know for certain. Just said he was livin' down in Soho."

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to come with us to the Yard."

"But what 'bout Brutus and the dogs in t'other buildin's?"

"Brutus is being cared for, and the other owners'll have to look after their own dogs for a day or two," Berglin explained.

"Day or two? It'll ruin me business," Drinkwater moaned

as the inspectors escorted him to the open lift doors. "My family needs the brass."

"It can't be helped," Berglin replied. "Besides, if your story about Ross is true, you're the only witness against him. Your own life may well be in danger."

After thorough, though not unfriendly, questioning, Drinkwater was placed in the lockup's best cell. The bulletin for his apprehension was rescinded, and information was given to the newspapers that Drinkwater was "assisting the police" in the Immroth case. No mention was made of Billy Ross. If he learned he was wanted, according to Berglin's reasoning, he might disappear. But if Ross thought the man he had framed for the murder was being held as a suspect, he might remain in London. And it followed, Berglin said, that the informant's tip concerning a possible burglary at The Crocker Arms was also part of Ross's elaborate plan to murder Immroth and have someone else in position to receive the blame for it.

Other than a visit to Drinkwater's cell to take him some magazines and tobacco for his pipe, Ian spent the rest of that day paring down the pile of paperwork on his desk and giving brief testimony at the Old Bailey concerning another case in

which he had been involved. It was nearing five o'clock when he entered his cubbyhole of an office and found a note from Berglin asking him to report immediately upon returning from court. After a quick study of the other messages left on his desk, Ian rushed through the hallways to Berglin's office. Mrs. Applebee had already left for the day, so Ian only knocked at the jamb as he passed through the open door. He halted in midstride when he saw a familiar blond uniformed constable stand up from behind Berglin's uncharacteristically file-cluttered desk.

"Lindley! Has the Yard administration finally come to its collective senses and promoted you over the lot of us?"

The young constable's face flushed. "Oh, no, sir. Inspector Berglin pulled me off my beat. Said he needed a good brain and fresh pair of eyes, and that I'd fit the bill. He ordered up some coffee and sat me down with all these cat burglary files. Told me to study them, and that he'd be back from the chief constable's office by six."

Ian smiled as he helped himself to the coffee from the carafe and collection of cups set up on the sideboard. Lindley's explanation sounded familiar: in much the same way, Berglin had once singled out the then

Constable McEwen to help in a double murder case. "And what have you discovered from studying those files?"

"It was all a bit of a jumble at first, but then I could make out some similarities. For instance, all the burglaries took place in flats on the top floors of their buildings. You'd think a burglar would aim for something easier than climbing nearly to the roof. I patrol outside one of those buildings, sir, and I can't see how anyone could climb its slick granite face."

Just like The Crocker Arms, Ian thought. He gave Lindley a quizzical look. "There is another alternative," he said. "And the other similarities?"

"Even though these burglaries have taken place over the last several months, not one jewel has shown up. Some of the silver has surfaced in pawnshops, but none of the gems. And this last similarity, sir, may only be a coincidence, but according to the insurance records, at least a few pieces of jewelry from each capper were purchased from Geoffrey Immroth's shop." Lindley chuckled. "Perhaps this Ross fellow was so impressed by Immroth's wares that he decided to go directly to the source. But then how did he know Immroth worked on jewelry in his flat?"

The harsh double jangle of Berglin's telephone interrupted

Lindley. "Yes, sir. Of course, sir. Thank you, sir." The constable replaced the receiver in its cradle. "That was Inspector Berglin. He says he won't be able to return to his office till tomorrow and that we should lock up the files and go home." When he did not receive a response, Lindley asked, "Is there something wrong, sir?"

Ian's mustache twitched before he answered. "No. But I think your observations may allow us to wrap up the case prettier than one of my wife's Christmas packets if only we can capture Billy Ross. Now, as the senior detective inspector has ordered, let's go home."

**A**fter an early morning ride on Tomalin, Ian reported to Berglin's office at eight thirty, where he met with Sir Michael, Terwillegar, and P.C. Lindley. Ian learned that during the previous night, the constable standing guard in the hallway outside Immroth's flat had heard noises coming from within. Thinking it was the cat having a romp, he entered the flat to discover an open window, but nothing else appeared to have been disturbed. McEwen smiled at the news.

"Has the informant been questioned concerning his source?"

he asked

"It seems he received his tip from someone he knew from his days at Reigate Prison," Terwillegar replied.

"Let me guess," Berglin interjected. "Billy Ross."

"Why, yes, sir. Over some pints at a pub, Ross let on he knew where the cat burglar would strike next. Of course the informant told his contact at the Yard straight off and collected a few bob for 't."

"So Ross set this elaborate plan in motion to make us think Drinkwater was our man. In any event, he'll be difficult to apprehend. Ian, you're grinning like the Cheshire Cat. What do you know that we don't?"

"Gentlemen, I propose we let Ross come to us tonight at Immroth's flat. Without a doubt it was he who opened the flat's window and was frightened off by the constable. Ross, as do most incorrigible criminals, thinks all police are too slow to fathom his plan. I have to admit that he has demonstrated some ingenuity in developing his scheme. But I intend to show this man that we cannot be deceived for long."

**I**an listened to the regular, measured breathing for several minutes before he could determine its source. The exhausted Terwillegar, seated in a soft chair hidden in

the deep shadows of a corner in Immroth's living room, had fallen asleep. The chimes from St. Vincent's church had struck one o'clock only moments before. But so long as Ian and P.C. Lindley, also hidden in the shadows, remained alert, there should be enough muscle to overcome any intruder. Inspector Berglin was ensconced in the spare bedroom in which Immroth worked on his jewelry. The uniformed constable who had been on duty in the hallway for the past two nights had been withdrawn to encourage Billy Ross to enter the flat again.

Once more Lady Jane lay sleeping on Ian's lap. Knowing the various escape routes and hiding places in the flat, the cat had successfully avoided capture by Mrs. De la Roche of the RSPCA. But she came willingly to Ian, who had volunteered to take her home with him. He wasn't sure what Ezme would think, but he knew the boys would welcome her. She would be an early Christmas present.

The window down the hallway opened so silently that Ian and Lindley's first inkling of an intruder was the rush of cold air sweeping in. Exchanging nods, both rose to their feet. Ian deposited Lady Jane on the glass-topped table among the green plants, where she felt secure, and moved over to Terwillegar.

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The man woke with a start at his touch, but Ian's hand clamped over his mouth kept him from speaking. Ian nodded in the direction of the hallway, then all three men queued up and waited.

The intruder moved quietly; the creaking of the door was the only sound as he entered one of the back rooms. Within seconds, though, light cascaded down the hallway when the switch was turned on. At Berglin's shout, Ian and his colleagues rushed down the hall toward the grappling forms of two men emerging from Immroth's workroom. Dressed in close-fitting black clothing, the more muscular Ross threw Berglin toward the three men closing in. Thus gaining a precious second of time, he spun around and disappeared out the window.

When Ian had negotiated Sir Michael's sprawled body, he thrust his torso through the window and looked up. Not a yard above his head, Ross's right foot was entangled in a rope ladder that blended invisibly against the building. There was enough illumination, however, from the waning moon and the reflected light surrounding the city to see the pale oval of Ross's face looking down as he struggled to get free. Ian stepped through the window onto the narrow ledge below it.

Grasping a heavy curtain rod bracket for support, he thrust his arm upward and entwined his fingers in the leg of the suspect's trousers.

"Lindley, take hold of me!" Then to Ross Ian called, "Give it up, man! If you thrash around like that, you'll go over!"

From within the flat he heard Berglin shout that he and Terwillegar were going to the roof to cut off Ross's escape. All Ian had to do was hold on for a minute. Lindley, meanwhile, had found a handhold inside the flat and, with his other hand, grabbed Ian's belt. All the while, Ross roared invectives and spat down from above. Within the sixty seconds Berglin had promised, McEwen heard his voice come from the roof. "Let go, Ian! He must come up to us or fall and perish."

Ian let go of Ross's leg, thanked Lindley for his help, and went into the w.c. to wash Ross's spittle from his face and hair. He smiled as he towelled off. He would enjoy taking part in the intensive questioning that Billy Ross now faced.

**"I** thought he'd be a tougher nut to crack than that," Terwillegar mumbled as he and McEwen left the smoky interrogation room wherein Billy Ross, with a solicitor beside him,



"It was something you said that gave me the final clue. Ross, having stolen so much jewelry bearing Immroth's mark, might have gone directly to the source, you said. What if, on the other hand, Ross was Immroth's source of jewels?"



and hot cocoa. Even Lady Jane, the newest member of the McEwen household, garnered a new collar. The huge cat was summarily hoisted off Ian's lap by James, Michael, and Francis and the new collar applied.

Crowded away from the animal by his brothers, James's attention drifted to the cat's old neckband.

"Dad, what's this round thing on Jane's collar?"

"The owner can roll up a slip of paper with his address and telephone number on it and put it in the cylinder for identification in case the animal strays," Ian said.

"Seems awfully large for just a slip of paper. Dad, should we put it on Jane's new collar with our address?"

Engrossed as he was in one of his gifts from Ezme, a gilt-edged edition of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Ian breathed an affirmative grunt.

It was only after James twice shouted, "Mum, Dad, look at this!" that he looked up from his book.

Sparkling in the incandescent light, a diamond pendant swung from a delicate gold chain draped in James's hand.

"Bring it here, son. Carefully," was Ian's gentle command.

"It was wrapped in a bit of cotton wool inside that round thing. This ring was with it." On

James's little finger was a distinctively shaped black opal half the size of Ian's thumbnail.

Ian recognized the ring from an insurance company photograph in one of the burglary files—the one burglary to which Billy Ross had confessed.

This, then, was the physical link between Ross and Immroth—and proof that they were partners in the cat burglary thefts.

"Can we keep them, Dad? They'd look smashing on Mum." James removed the ring and slipped it on Ezme's finger.

"No, son. Those baubles have to be returned to their owners. And because your father's a policeman, you cannot accept the money offered by the insurance companies for their return. It's too bad Brutus wasn't carrying those jewels; Colin Drinkwater might've found them. His family certainly could use the reward."

Ian sat back in his rocking chair and let his eyes flit back and forth in thought. Seconds later he jumped to his feet.

"Of course. Immroth wouldn't keep those stolen gems in that useless safe or on his person. He would only let his trusted companions keep them—and, in Brutus's case, carry them to his shop."

He strode down the hallway to the telephone and picked up

the directory. In a minute he was apologizing to Colonel Clarence Chalmers for ringing him up so late in the evening.

"A Merry Christmas to you, too, sir. Is Brutus still wearing that collar with the replica of

the brandy barrel? He is? I know tomorrow's Christmas, sir, but I have an odd request. I'd like to come round with Colin Drinkwater for just a few minutes in the morning and have him say hello to his old friend Brutus."

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FICTION

# MORE PEOPLE LIKE ME

Antigone Barton



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/98

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The sun was dizzying, the air was hot to the touch, and I had spent the day within the steamy, thatched confines of the Tiki bar I work for, watching tourists jump in and out of a cold swimming pool that was almost within my arm's reach. I do not consider myself to be, as Browning put it, "faultless to a fault," so I will admit that by the end of such a day I am not a man to cross. That is why, I suppose, I finally took action against the neighborhood children.

Children are of course spectacularly unaffected by weather. It is one of the many terrible things about them. So I was saddened but not surprised to see them swarming all over my block on skateboards as I turned the corner. The woman who lives in the big house next to my apartment court, however, did not share my resignation. She was sweeping at them with a broom, screaming at them in a high-pitched voice, and otherwise doing all she could to encourage them to torment her. She's very fussy, as we all know, about her property, and that had doubtless helped focus the youngsters' attention on her particular front yard that afternoon.

As I watched, an especially daring one decided to see if his skateboard, given a running

start, could clear the small herb garden at the side of her yard. Now I am thin but strong for my size, so I caught the lad by his shirt and held him in the air for a moment while his skateboard rolled off without him.

He shrieked, and his friends suspended their play.

"Children," I told them, "you are trespassing on this woman's property. She has a right to peace and quiet here. And unless you want me to personally canvass your parents' homes tonight and apprise them of your activities, you will find somewhere else to play."

There was a moment of indecision while they considered the possible meanings of my words and weighed the cost of defiance, and then they left.

I turned to the woman, who was clutching her chest.

"What is wrong with them?" she demanded.

I had never heard her speak before. Her voice was hoarse, her accent refined.

"So often it seems 'one half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other,'" I said gently. "Jane Austen said that."

She shook her head briskly.

"It's their parents," she said. "They live right on this block, but they don't do anything. Nobody does anything to stop them. I don't know what would

have happened if you hadn't been here."

"Well, I wish there were more people like me," I said courteously and moved to walk on.

Her hand, with steely fingers, caught my arm.

"Do you mean that?" she asked with an odd, smiling urgency.

"I wouldn't have said it if I hadn't meant it," I said and passed her, feeling as I did her dim, odd eyes looking after me.

I turned back to her and waved. She hadn't moved. She stood, her hand on her chest, looking at me and nodding.

So that's what she's like, I thought; she had always been a mysterious figure to me. Her house is by far the largest on our street, it has never been painted, and as the Conch Train Conductor pointed out recently, it has no windows at all, only louvered doors. I have never met anyone who knows her, which is rare on an island the size of Key West, and she seems to have been here forever. No one remembers a time when she wasn't. Now that we've spoken, I thought, I probably know her better than anyone.

I let myself in and took my clothes off on the way to a very cold shower. When I got out, the phone was ringing. I let it ring. I knew that it was Helena, the only person who knows me well

enough, but not quite well enough, to call me right after I get home from work. She does this because she wants to make sure that I have, in fact, come right home from work. She is an emigré from Poland, has been my girlfriend for six months, and has yet to grasp the concept of a free country as I have presented it to her.

"We are separate people," I tell her, "and if I want to go out with other people, or you do, we must not interfere with each other."

"But," she tells me hopelessly, "I don't want to go out with other people."

Nor, to be honest, do I. I don't tell her that, though, because it is the principle that matters and she has trouble grasping abstracts. I have noticed this in general about her countrypeople.

She didn't call back. And when I tried to reach her later, she was out, which was a change. So I went to bed with a Glenlivet on the rocks with a water back and with *The Brothers Karamazov*, which I have been trying for six months to finish.

The next day dawned fully as hot as the one before but with the difference that I was awakened at eight o'clock by my alarm clock. Usually I am awakened first by the neighbor-



hood children, who, being on summer vacation, have taken it upon themselves to make sure that nobody on the block oversleeps. This is a bigger hardship on the others than it is on me. I like mornings, the fresh cleanliness of the air and the solitude they provide, and I have one of the few jobs on the island that actually requires me to be at work at nine o'clock. I turned on the radio and looked out the window. The two boys across the street were out, sitting on their porch swing and reading silently. I 'knew, rather than felt,' myself to be happy with this (as Jane Austen put it); they looked so forlorn.

"The weather," the radio announcer was saying slowly. "I don't really need to tell you the weather, do I? As Ben Franklin put it, 'Some are weatherwise, some are otherwise' . . ."

Odd, I thought, but interesting as he rambled on about how much of our time is wasted discussing the obvious. He went on at such length about it that there was no music while I was getting ready for work.

On my way out I ran into the girl who lives in the apartment next to mine. We work opposite hours, she being a night person, but now here she was, stretching in her doorway.

"You're up early," I observed. I noted with approval that she

looked trimmer than usual. She turned to me and smiled. Strange, I thought, that I had never realized how attractive she was. She has the kind of small, upturned nose, not unlike my own, that I have always considered vital to good looks. There was an intelligent quality also to her demeanor that drew me warmly to her.

"I love mornings," she said. "I was just thinking of getting a different job that will let me get up earlier."

"Good," I said. "Then maybe we will see more of each other." (At the same time thinking "good fences make good neighbors," as Frost said.)

My walk to work is usually a solitary one because, as I mentioned, there are few reasons to be up and about early here. On this particular morning, however, the streets were fairly swarming with lean, muscular people out for their morning exercise. It should have been a pleasant sight—I'm always happy to see people staying fit—but the sight of all those people made me wonder if there was an event of some sort today that I had forgotten. Also, of course, morning is supposed to be my quiet time, and here I was, practically bumping into people.

"Excuse me," I said to one lanky fellow whom I did bump into, "I'm not used to seeing so

many people out at this time. What's the occasion, do you know?"

The man smiled irritably at me.

"I don't know about the others," he said, including me amongst them, "but to me, 'this city now doth, like a garment, wear the beauty of the morning; silent, bare.' Wordsworth said that," he added condescendingly.

"I know," I said and continued to dodge people all the way to work, thinking it is now time for the fitness craze to end.

The first thing I do after setting up the bar each morning is to fix myself an espresso with a shot of Grand Marnier in it. It is a private habit, so I was somewhat perturbed when a thin little man instantly seated himself at the bar and said, "That's just the thing. I'll have one of those, too."

Of course I prepared it for him, with only a conspiratorial wink to acknowledge the complicity between us.

When, however, over the course of the next half hour, five more people sat down and ordered the same, I actually began to sweat. We were running out of the stuff for one thing, which would be hard to explain to the manager when he came in at eleven. Then, too, there was something about the sight of six

skinny men licking Grand Marnier from their upper lips and rolling their heads happily from side to side that made me think they were making fun of me.

They all left, mercifully, after one espresso each, and I began to recover my equilibrium.

There were bright spots in the morning, too. Timmy, who is the pot scrubber, barback, and general errand runner, got my entire order of bar supplies to me first thing for a change. But he was so smug about it.

"As an intrinsically lazy person," he told me, "I realized it would behoove me to get everything done before you could think of more for me to do."

I have hoped for the longest time that he would look at it that way, but how posturing and effete he seemed! It made me miss the amiable slob I'd known.

The early afternoon was slow, torturously so, with tourists from the hotel jumping in and out of the swimming pool but being prudent enough, for once, not to mix sun, water sports, and alcohol. It is a policy that I approve of, but of course there was no money in it for me.

Helena came by, which was by far the strangest occurrence of the day. I have visited her at work often, but she had never felt free to do the same. She is

too shy. Or perhaps she believes me, about my interest in other women; and is afraid of encountering a rival.

"What a delightful surprise!" I lied, shaken. I was wondering just how much further my capacity to accept delightful surprises could be stretched that day.

"I thought it would be fun to see you work," she replied clearly, her accent much less thick than it usually is. Perhaps, I thought, it was because she seemed so much more relaxed than usual.

"You look wonderful," I told her. She did—radiant.

"Thank you," she said smoothly. "I don't feel it. I think I was out too late for my own good last night."

"Yes, where were you?"

No, I was not thinking on my feet today.

She smiled. Actually she smirked, a ludicrous little curl to her upper lip. This is what she said:

"I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is none."

"What?" I cried out, beginning to wish that this day would just shrivel up and die.

"*Macbeth*," she said with that terrible smirk that looked as if it was meant to be friendly but made me want to scream at her.

At the same time her attraction for me was overwhelming.

"I know what it's from," I said coldly, "as I am, doubtless, the person who told you. What I'm asking is, what are you trying to tell me?"

But I think I knew. So I was filled more with dread than surprise when she said, "That I can see what you have been trying to tell me. We don't need to worry about each other's private lives. What matters is the time we spend together."

"Yes," I said. "That's what I've been trying to tell you." But just then it seemed like the stupidest thing in the world to have been trying to tell anyone. "Good," I added. "See you tonight, then?"

"No," she said thoughtfully. "Not tonight."

And she leaned over the bar in a rather forward manner, kissed me goodbye, and left.

Most unbecoming, I thought, and if she thinks that kind of behavior is intriguing, she'll find out how wrong she is. Still, I couldn't stop thinking about her and wondering what I had done.

Then the afternoon rush, what there was of it, began.

"A Glenlivet on the rocks with a water back," a sleek little tourist told me in clipped tones.

"Excuse me?" I said. He repeated himself with elaborate slowness while I watched the

skin on his tiny little nose wrinkle up with his sneer.

"I heard you," I said just as slowly. "We just don't get much call for that."

"Most people don't know," he said with the shameless elitism of one who considers himself a connoisseur.

I hate him, I thought. And then, with no warning, *I hate everyone.*

I could have followed up on that and realized that, no, I don't hate anyone. I never have. I was kept too busy, however, over the next twenty minutes pouring Glenlivet on the rocks with water backs for however many skinny, sarcastic people came in, and fighting back the purest panic that I have ever known. There were the added challenges of keeping up with the demand for glasses, each customer requiring two, and doing it all quickly enough to prevent them from drumming their fingers on the bar, rolling their eyes, and exchanging remarks with each other regarding my inefficiency. And throughout all this I had to keep from confusing them with each other, as they were taking on an increasingly similar appearance with their wrinkling little noses and their bland, narrow faces. I would say it was like a nightmare, but I have never had a nightmare as unrelenting as that ghastly day.

The saving grace was that they left after one, or two at the most. A temperate lot. A scrawny, sanctimonious, upturned-nose, temperate lot of horrible people. Who all seemed frighteningly familiar.

"Well, how is it?"

I turned and found myself looking into the gaunt face of the woman who lives in the house next to mine.

"What," I said as pleasantly as possible, "are you talking about?"

"Your day," she said impatiently. "How are you enjoying your day?"

"I'm not enjoying it," I told her quietly. "I am having the most tedious, unrewarding, inconvenient, miserable day of my entire life."

She didn't look as if she was about to cry, she had too strong a face for that, but she did look very bitterly let down.

"I thought it was what you wanted," she said, "and I wanted to do something nice for you because you helped me with those awful children yesterday. I should have known—people never know what they want."

"What made you think I wanted a horrible day?" I said, giving up utterly on trying to sound sane.

"No," she said, "what you said. More people like you. You *wished* for it. You said, 'I wish

there were more people like me,' and even though I can't do anything for myself any more, I knew I could at least give you that. I should have known," she said again, "people never know what they want."

And she walked away.

Now, of course, I think she's completely out of her mind.

It was an odd day, but at last the sun set as it always does and it ended. The next morning I was awakened by the raucous noise of the neighborhood children, and the radio announcer gave the full weather report, which, expectedly, mentioned hot and humid. Tourists and locals got drunk throughout the day as they are supposed to, on

margaritas and rum and cokes. It was, in all, a refreshing return to the normal—with the exception that I made a record amount in tips.

There was one thing. I called Helena, and she said that she still wanted more "space." Fine—I'll see to it that she gets it. In fact I won't even think about her. I won't think about her at all.

The woman in the house next door was right about one thing. I shouldn't have said what I did, about wanting more people like me. It was silly. But that was in "my salad days, when I was green in judgement: cold in blood, to say as I said then"—as Shakespeare put it.

FICTION

# LIME SOUP

Gary  
Alexander

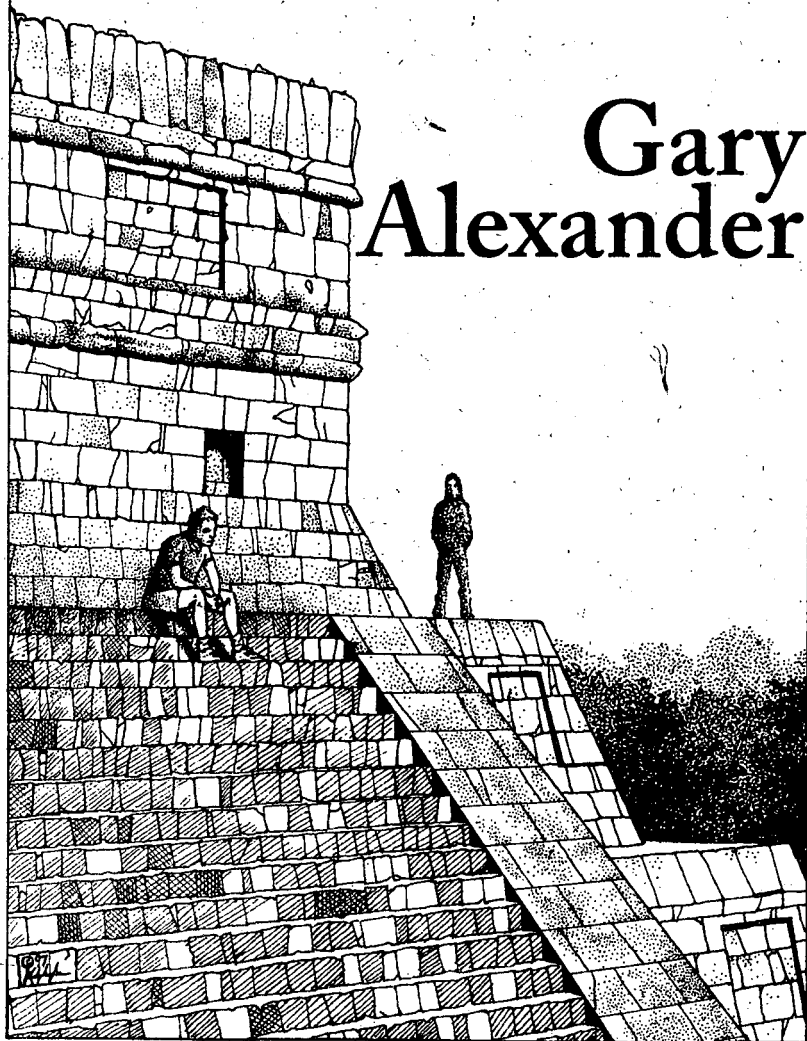


Illustration by Bill Kalpakoglou

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**D**ave Kenworthy looks at his bowl, blows on the steam, sniffs. Chicken broth with chunks. Lime slices floating on top like life preservers.

"Okay, what is it?"

Marge Kenworthy tenses. "*Sopa de lima.*"

"In English?"

"Lime soup. A traditional Yucatecan dish. Old, tough tortillas were torn up and cooked in broth to simulate chicken and stretch the budget."

She looks at him and sips.

"Delicious," she says. "Light and refreshing."

He picks up his spoon. "In Cancún, we could be having cheeseburgers, pizza, anything."

"Where's the adventure in that?" Marge says, dipping in for more.

"You asked if you could order lunch. I said okay. Lime is to wedge in your beer bottle, not to eat hot."

They are in Mexico's Yucatán, at a hotel cafe in Valladolid, a town between Chichén Itzá and Cancún. Chichén Itzá is a big whoop-de-do ruin Marge just has to see despite their Cancún package being only four days, three nights. Dave's knuckles whiten around his spoon.

"You might surprise yourself and like it," she coaxes.

He slurps a spoonful. It's tasty, but that's the last thing in the world he would admit. He excuses himself.

He lumbers through the hotel courtyard, past the rooms with wood-shuttered windows, past the swimming pool, past the restrooms, and out a side door.

He exits onto a dusty sidewalk. Blockish one and two story houses of white stucco are shut up, and nobody's outside. It's so hot his eyes sting. The locals, he thinks, at least they have the good sense to siesta when the sun is straight up.

He goes for a walk. Marge is a substitute teacher. She doesn't know everything, but she's working on it. Her and her guidebook informed him that Valladolid has a cathedral built in 1552. Just for the hell of it he'll go scout out the thing.

He stops in a small grocery and asks directions. The clerk speaks no English. Dave's Spanish consists of *cerveza* and about six other words. He gives up on the old church and buys a pack of cigarettes.

The package looks like Marlboros, but when he lights up, he smells asphalt. The smoke hits the floor of his chest with a thump. His knees lose feeling, and he leans into a lamppost.



Must be what a dope fiend experiences after too long without a fix, he concludes.

Marge checks her watch. Forty minutes. Dave is never in the bathroom that long, even with the Sunday sports section. She sighs, thinking here we go again.

This is the second time he has walked out on her away from home. The first was at the lake, following an argument about her cleaning fish he hadn't caught anyway. He took the boat across to the general store/gas station/post office/bait shop/tavern and guzzled beer until the kids drove around and poured him into the car.

Usually Dave slams the front door and stomps off to the next cul-de-sac to his buddy Leo, who puts him up in the basement rec room where he watches televised sports until he cools off.

Their son and daughter chipped in on this trip. It came out of the blue, those sweethearts, a gift to celebrate their thirty-three-year-and-four-month anniversary. A third of a century, they said; that's pretty special.

Well, Marge isn't so sure it's too awfully special. When they get home, no more procrastination. They will hire a marriage counselor or she will hire a lawyer. Dave's choice.

Marge waits one hour on the dot and pays the check. A slight woman whose red hair has long since gone gray, Marge Kenworthy is careful to fasten her sun hat before venturing outside. She has fair skin that scorches and freckles rather than tans. She heads for Cancún. Finding his way to their hotel will be a bit more of a challenge for Dave than a five minute stroll from Leo's. And maybe, just maybe, he'll learn his lesson.

Whatever happens, though, she hopes he doesn't start smoking again.

Dave finally locates the hotel and sees that Marge (and their rental car) are gone. The heat and the exertion have sapped the anger from him. He is thickening in the middle and thinning on top. He feels like he did when he worked a double shift at a bottling plant one summer long, long ago.

A leafy and manicured park is catty-corner. He slumps onto a bench and lights a cigarette. He experiences only mild dizziness and figures he's developing a tolerance for Third World tobacco.

Marge is on her merry way to Chichén Itzá. She'll return for him in four or five or eight hours, her guidebook margins blackened with

notes, babbling about the accomplishments of the ancient Maya. When she starts speaking to him again, that is.

But why should she speak to him? Except to nag him how he blew his stack over nothing. Again. And she's probably right. If it was over something, anything, he'd still be pissed regardless of heat and fatigue. Then on the other hand, how's a bowl of soup supposed to stick to his ribs?

A taxi driver at the curb is lazing against a fender. Dave has an idea. He asks how much to Chichén Itzá. The cabby speaks not a word of English, but he speaks numerals with a Gulf Coast twang and gives Dave a quote.

Dave is an insurance underwriter, a careful man with a buck. Although these pesos with their big numbers and engravings of dead Mexicans are not quite real to him, the quoted number seems rather large.

As he converts currencies in his head, a woman crossing the street says, "Don't. It's a rip-off."

She has long stringy hair and a headband. She wears a tie-dyed shirt and a stack of cheap bracelets on each arm that jingle as she walks. Dave hasn't seen a hippie in years.

"How much should I pay?"

She is next to him, no longer flattered by distance. She has crow's feet and the beginning of a wattle. She is the genuine article, Dave believes; an artifact from that era.

"Where are you going?"

"Chichén Itzá."

"Pay not a peso. We're going there, too."

The second half of "we're" is a longhaired guy who could be her double. He is wearing granny glasses, coveralls, no shirt, and sandals. He has the filthiest toenails Dave has ever seen.

"Don't mind driving; do you?" she says. "I don't drive, and my old man's wallet was stolen. His license was in it."

Dave drives their battered Volkswagen Beetle. It struggles to accelerate and pumps a roostertail of blue smoke. The interior isn't too nifty either. He isn't certain whether what he smells is the car or them. They don't exchange ten words. Dave chalks it up to a generation gap, though there isn't much age difference.

Marge ought to see him now.

Marge, meanwhile, appreciates Dave if for no other reason than that he accepted the driving chores. The highway is narrow, pot-

holed, and shoulderless. Every little village has an array of speed bumps and those soldiers or policemen or whatever they are still manning checkpoints, stopping all vehicles. At this rate she won't reach Cancún until nightfall.

Marge's brother, a locomotive mechanic, terms Dave's behavior as "little episodes." They're like pressure relief valves, he says, discharging excess boiler steam in harmless doses.

Marge's daughter put the counseling bug in her ear. She promised that the next time it happened they'd drag the old fool off for professional help.

Their son is a strong silent type like his dad, a chip off the old block who holds everything inside. He sympathizes but pleads neutrality. If she persists with her grievances, he plugs his ears as he did as a child.

"No!" Marge says, surprising herself.

She stops and U-turns. This is her vacation, too. She has no intention of wasting any more of it. At this point she cannot care less if Dave spends the rest of the trip at the pool bar, swilling beer and ogling bikinis. Which is probably where the old fool is at this very moment. The remnants of a glorious civilization of a millennium ago await.

Dave thanks the hippies and enters Chichén Itzá. It is sprawling and grassy, with piles of sculpted rubble here, there, and everywhere. He has by osmosis absorbed Marge's lectures on the place and remembers the major attractions. Surely he'll bump into her at one.

The Sacred Cenote is a big, round, sinkhole well. The slimy green surface of the water is a good fifty feet down, and the limestone walls are sheer. He forgets who they used to toss in as sacrifices. Virgins?

The cenote is ringed with gawkers and shutterbugs, but no Marge.

He moves on to the ball court. This is more his speed. A stone ring twenty feet up is built into a wall. The object was to knock a hard rubber ball through the ring without using your hands. Then the game ended, and somebody was sacrificed, his living, beating heart cut right out of his chest. The winning captain or the losing captain, Marge said they didn't know which. Dave assumes that any ball game that always ends one-zip you have to keep the fans in the seats somehow.

Still no Marge.

He sees the biggie, El Castillo, that four-sided pyramid that's in nearly every tourism ad for Mexico. Up he goes, counting steps. Ninety-one, just like Marge said. Ninety-one per side times four and add the top and you have three hundred sixty-five, the days of the year, important to the ancients, who were whiz-bang astronomers.

Dave sits down heavily, sucking air in great gulps. He's sweating like a racehorse but in general feels pretty damn good. There's a light breeze, and all that's lacking is a cold brew.

He can take in most of the park from this vantage point. He'll see Marge before she spots him. When she does, he'll give a nonchalant wave. She'll have a cow.

An hour passes, and Dave's getting worried. She's lost or having trouble with the car or she went to Cancún instead. She's gonna be fretting and she's gonna be steamed, an undesirable combination.

He barely notices as clouds the color of gunmetal roll in. Thunder booms like artillery, and lightning converts the sky into a video game. Fairweather tourists scamper down the pyramid to escape the downpour; the weenies.

In ten minutes it's done. El Castillo steams, and Chichén Itzá smells like laundry. The hippies materialize, one on each side.

"You're a believer, aren't you?" says the gal hippie.

"In what?" Dave asks suspiciously.

"In them."

"Okay, who's them?"

"The distant travelers who assisted the Maya in these accomplishments. Their return is prophesied."

Marge mentioned these UFO wackos who claim flying saucer people were responsible for everything. "I'll pass. How about you?"

"We believe it is in the realm of possibility."

I'll just bet you do, Dave thinks. He explains how he's looking for his wife and doesn't want to miss her.

"I got an idea, man," says the guy hippie. "Check the parking lot for your old lady's car."

His obvious logic stuns Dave, and he doesn't resist when they volunteer to help look. Although the car isn't there, the hippies persuade Dave that his wife is safe and sound in Cancún. And as luck would have it, they're going to Cancún, too.

Dave is once more at the wheel of the Beetle. At the entrance to the highway he begins to turn, and the guy hippie says, "No, man. The other way."

The guy is sitting behind him. His breath is none too swell. Dave backs up and says, "Look at the sign. Cancún is thisaway."

"We know a shortcut, man."

"I think you're mistaken. My wife's gonna to be mad as a nest of hornets if I spend hours running around in circles with you," Dave says, resuming his turn.

Dave feels something cold and hard against his cheek. He cocks his head and sees a pistol barrel that at this proximity looks like a cannon.

"No mistake, man," says guy hippie.

Marge slams on her brakes and skids to avoid the smoke-belching clunker that shoots out of the Chichén Itzá access road. The old VW Beetle almost hits her head-on, then swerves to the other side of the road before regaining control.

The culprit can't possibly be Dave but is Dave. There isn't another man in the world who looks like David Kenworthy when he's agitated, his teeth clenched, his ears and nose as red as an overripe tomato. And who is he with? Two women by the looks of the hair. Unless Marge's eyes are playing tricks on her, the one in the rear leaning between Dave and the other lady is sticking a gun in Dave's face.

Marge follows at a prudent distance. She sighs, wondering what kind of mess he has gotten himself into now.

Dave reaches for a cigarette. They're soggy from the storm. He finally summons the words. "Okay, what's the deal? Why are you kidnapping me?"

"Not kidnapping, man," says guy hippie. "Borrowing you is what we're doing."

"Borrowing me to where?"

"Mexico City."

"How far's that?"

"A thousand miles, give or take," gal hippie says with a shrug.

"We'll drive in shifts," guy hippie says. "Piece of cake."

"I thought nobody could drive."

"We'll take our shifts at night when the cops aren't out. You can sleep. Lighten up and groove on the scenery, man. Oops. Slow down. Be cool with them or it's your ass."

"Them" is the group of soldiers or cops who have set up a roadblock ahead. Dave is beginning to get the picture.

"My wife and I went through one of these this morning. She says it's politics. Our government pushes their government to be tougher on drugs. The surprise checkpoints are part of the crackdown. Anybody carrying what they shouldn't be carrying has a problem."

Guy hippie grins and says, "Give the man a cee-gar."

In the mirror his teeth look to Dave like rotted piers in a mudflat. "Something else Marge told me is that there are old American hippies in the Yucatán. They burned out their wiring in the 1970's on dope and never went home. They bum around, mooch, do some dealing."

Gal hippie cackles. "Sticks and stones."

"So where do I fit in?" Dave asks.

"You're respectable, man."

"I look like a square."

"Hey, it's been years since I heard that word," gal hippie says.

"I don't suppose there're registration papers for this car," Dave says.

"I was going to look in the glove compartment but haven't got around to it," says gal hippie.

"Terrific. They tear this piece of junk apart and find what they're looking for, it's me who's in deep doo-doo. You're just a couple of innocent hitchhikers I picked up."

"Win-win," says girl hippie.

A man wearing sergeant's stripes checks Dave's driver's license and squints inside at the hippies. Dave hasn't forgotten the hippie's gun. He thinks his life has ended. But they are waved through.

The hippies give Dave congratulatory pats.

"You did good, man," guy hippie says.

"Our guardian angel," gal hippie says.

"Okay, what happens in Mexico City?"

"We give you our heartfelt thanks and cut you loose, man."

Yeah, right, Dave, thinks.

Marge realizes she can't trail the mysterious car indefinitely. When the kids sprang this gift on them, she went out the next day and bought Spanish language tapes. Her study has served them adequately at restaurants and their hotel desk, but there's not a chance she can articulate her suspicions to police who may be neither English speaking nor trustworthy.

And what would she say? My husband is in a strange car with two

strange women, one of whom has a firearm. She can visualize their reaction, an exchange of leering winks.

What to do? Nothing, except to do what she is doing, for as long as she can.

Dave is thinking how his life isn't so terrible after all. Marge is tops. The job doesn't look quite as lousy either. He hired on after one year of college and moved up from the mailroom to senior underwriter. Three years, two months until retirement and the company's closing offices right and left, consolidating into black holes eight hundred miles apart, downsizing like crazy, and nobody will clue him in where he stands. He should talk to Marge about this and promises himself he will.

If he gets the chance. He almost laughs, thinking that he was scared spitless going into the office. How he hadn't the foggiest what fear really and truly is.

"What's so funny, man?"

"You would be if you didn't have that gun."

"Everybody's a comedian," says gal hippie.

"Why are you slowing down?" guy hippie demands.

Lost in his ruminations, he hasn't noticed that he has slowed. Nor that the car they almost hit at Chichén Itzá is closer in his mirror. Also unnoticed is the sudden darkness. Marge says the sun sets at this latitude as if a bucket has been dropped over it.

The car sure looks familiar, though like a zillion other rental units. But how come the silhouette in the driver's seat could be Marge's twin?

Dave chalks it up to fear and a guilty conscience. Then again, what if it is Marge? This is his predicament, not hers to be drawn into. He steps hard on the gas pedal.

"What's the hurry, man?"

"You say too slow, you say too fast. Which is it?"

"What I'm saying and you can read my lips," guy hippie says, raising his gun, "is no funny business. No more of this herky-jerky to attract attention. No more false moves."

"No more false moves," Dave says. "Sounds like a line from a movie."

"That's the flick where the good guy dies in the end," says gal hippie.

Dave's eye has been on the fuel gauge. The needle's touching the E. Dave wonders what's worse, riding with them in the dark or run-



ning out of gas with them in the middle of nowhere. Probably the latter, so he brings up the subject. They look at each other like gasoline is a new concept.

"I could also use the facilities," Dave says. "Isn't that a Pemex station up ahead?"

"Likewise," says gal hippie.

Guy hippie says, "You and me, we go in the potty house as a team. Just remember—"

"Okay," Dave says. "No false moves."

Marge taps her brakes as the Beetle pulls into a Pemex, a service station that is part of the Mexican oil monopoly. They park at the restrooms. Two cars and an attendant are at the pumps. She idles at the opposite corner and watches her husband get out of the car. The individual in the back seat, too, who appears to be male. Dave and he enter the men's room as if they are Siamese twins. The scraggly-haired rider in the front goes into the ladies'.

Marge doesn't know exactly what to do except that doing nothing is the last thing she wants to do. She takes a deep breath and puts the car into gear.

Dave has finished doing what he has to do. Guy hippie's gun is hanging at his side. He gestures with it for Dave to lead. Dave obeys, knowing that this is when he should make his move, now or never. But his last fight was during the sixth grade when Rollie Hoopsma decked him in two punches.

Marge is there, engine running, passenger door open. It's up to him, and her presence distracts guy hippie for the instant it takes Dave to land a wild haymaker. Guy hippie howls as his granny glasses crush in Dave's fist. He falls against the wall, dazed.

Dave is in the car and Marge is fishtailing onto the highway, tires spitting dust and rocks. Dave takes a final glimpse, half expecting a muzzle flash from guy hippie's gun. But he's on a knee, holding his eye, and gal hippie is hopping out of the ladies' room, hitching up her pants.

"Well, you've had a big day."

"Long story. I'll tell you all about it."

"Communication is good," Marge says. "We'll find someplace to stop and talk and relax."

Dave is looking into his mirror.

"Oh, they won't be along anytime soon," Marge says, handing Dave their keys.

"That's my girl." He throws them out his window and sneezes.

"Catching cold?"

He tosses out the soggy cigarettes, too, hoping she doesn't see. "I was out in the rain for a while."

"I smell cigarettes. Were they smokers?"

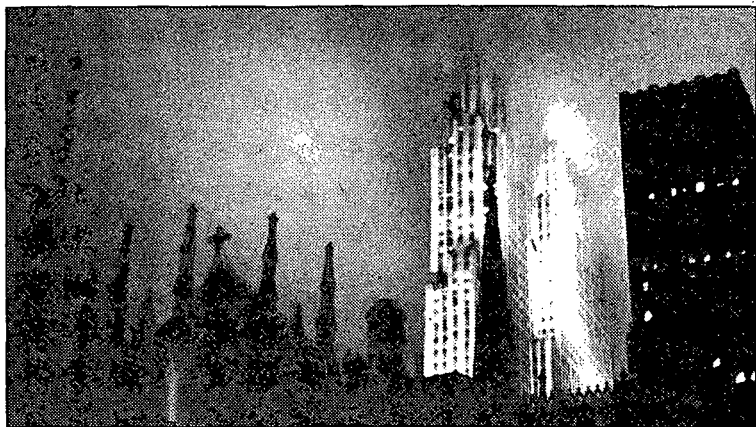
He flexes his hand. His knuckles are bleeding, but they don't feel broken. "Like chimneys."

"Hungry?"

"Uh-huh. I could eat a horse." He pauses. "In fact, I'm so hungry I'd settle for a bowl of that weird soup."

"You're on."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Photo by Rolan Fajardo*

A mysterious moment. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

# THE SOLBORNE VAMPIRE



Charles  
Sheffield

Illustration by David Monette

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/98

It was late afternoon on the shortest day of the year. An iron frost had lain since noon on the ground outside; now it was settling on the flat roof of the square brick warehouse.

At nine o'clock of that same morning, the building roof had been comfortably warm. The temperature inside had been scorching hot, well over ninety degrees. The explosion of the boiler, at twenty-seven minutes before midday, had taken out every window and scattered fragments of glass and black iron a quarter mile in every direction. The inside heat had been bleeding away ever since. Wet towels were turning rigid, and soon once-boiling water in jugs and bowls would freeze.

The injured had been treated and the dead removed. The cleanup crew had done their best and were leaving. Shards of metal, embedded deep in solid brick walls, would have to wait, as would a thorough examination of the shattered relic in the middle of the room.

Just two people remained. The younger, a man of about forty with a gloomy, introspective face, was pacing along one wall. He would not look at the ruined steam engine. "That's it," he said. "It's over. I should never have left Glasgow. I'll not build another one, no matter how you and Matthew urge."

His companion had been picking up bloody rags and swabs and dropping them into a bucket. Now he straightened. He had worked through the previous night with a difficult delivery, and awakened to come to the Birmingham suburb after only three hours of sleep. His fat face was grey and he drooped with fatigue, but he permitted no sign of that to show in his voice.

"You won't build another tonight, Jimmy, that I will admit. But tomorrow? Wait and see. I'll wager you will see differently."

"You would lose. I'm finished with all of this. I'll go back to instrument making."

"You cannot do that." The heavily built man bent down to pick up one last rag, grunted at his aching bones, and moved to where an oak medical chest stood on a workbench. Somehow, despite his weariness and absence of front teeth, the smile on his pockmarked face managed to be reassuring. "You must labor on, Jimmy. The world awaits the perfection of your ideas. The day will come when they—" he swept a brawny arm to take in the whole of the north of England "—will use your engines to drive a million spinning jennys. Your inventions will run the world. A hundred years from now water

power will be one with Nineveh and Babylon."

"Water wheels at least don't kill and maim."

"One man died here—miracle enough, seeing the force of the explosion. And I gather that Ned Sumpton disobeyed your orders."

"I told him not to start without me, that I would be busy at the Soho works until noon." For the first time the balding Scotsman glanced at the wreckage of the engine that reflected so much of his dreams and labor. "Ned was so impatient. I said to him, time and time, steam is not a toy, it's a force of nature. You treat it lightly at your peril. And then to ignore the pressure, and never to check the safety valve. . . ."

"Whatever he did, he paid for that and more." The physician closed the brass clasps on his medical chest. "Jimmy Watt, if you have trouble handling your job, how would you deal with mine? You've seen just one death today. Do you realize that it's my second, and close to being my third? I was able to save the mother—I hope—but the baby died within two hours of delivery."

"I couldn't handle your job, Erasmus. I know it, and you know it. Even if I had your medical knowledge, I lack your fortitude."

"As I lack your skills as engi-

neer. There's space in the world for many complementary talents. As for fortitude, that is not innate. It's acquired by practice." Erasmus Darwin glanced out of the nearest window, now a ragged square of emptiness in the whitewashed wall. "Jimmy, tonight I think I will have to throw myself on your hospitality. I don't see a trip home as feasible unless I abandon the sulky. Even then it would be difficult. The roads were bad coming, and now they'll be like iron."

"Of course." The other man roused himself. "I'm a barbarian. You must be exhausted and starving. And in any case, if I sent you off without his seeing you, Matthew would never forgive me. You can stay with me. Let's go and have dinner now—if you feel ready for it?"

"I can hardly wait." Darwin hefted his medical case and braced it against his broad chest. "I'm famished. Will we eat at your home also?"

"Oh, I think not. I'm not much of one for eating; the way you are." Watt surveyed Darwin's ample stomach, and for the first time since the accident a glint of humor came to his eye. "I think we'll dine at Matthew's. He has more money than both of us together, and he keeps a far better table. And he'll be agog to know what new ideas you've



had since the last Lunar Society meeting."

"You mean I'll have to sing for my supper? What makes you think I'm ready for that?"

"If you're not, it will be the first time ever." Watt was leading the way through a battered warehouse door that hung crookedly on its hinges. "Come on. A wash, a nap, and a good meal. I'll send word to Lichfield that you won't be home tonight."

As the first night of winter put its lock on the land, the chance of more visitors to Matthew Boulton's sprawling and battlemented house seemed small. The house turned inward, shutters barred and doors bolted. Outside, a light fall of snow had begun. It was too cold for large flakes. The tiny stinging crystals didn't settle where they fell, but blew restlessly across the surface in response to variable breaths of wind too weak to move tree branches. Small drifts built up against the hedgerows. Badgers burrowed deeper in their sets, and the foxes followed their noses across the frozen countryside in search of winter hares.

Within the house all was snug and festive. Christmas was only four days away, and ivy, holly, and mistletoe hung above the fireplace of the great dining room. At the long table, dishes

came and came: smoked eel, broiled turbot, veal and ham pie, quails stuffed with chestnuts, stargazy pie, capons stuffed with onions and oysters, a great smoking round of roast beef flanked by roast parsnips and potatoes and carrots, brandied plum pudding with candied peel and hard sauce, and finally a whole wheel of Stilton cheese. Boulton, owner of the finest metal works in Europe, knew his man. He offhandedly apologized for the absence of roast goose and suckling pig. The staff had scheduled those closer to Christmas. If only, he had known that Darwin would be here . . .

"You would have done no differently." Restored by an hour of sleep and a mountain of food, Darwin was in his element. An appreciative audience inspired him. Between mouthfuls of dried apricots he had been enlarging on Dr. Withering's extraordinary and recent success with the humble foxglove to alleviate or even cure cases of dropsy, and the potential of that new dried-leaf decoction to supplement Jesuit-bark, aloes, and guaiacum. Even Watt seemed in his interest in the subject to be forgetting the day's disaster—except at some deep inner level always present in the gloomy, self-doubting Scot.





"You are, Matthew," Darwin went on, "a person of method."

At that moment the iron knockers on the great double doors of the house sounded like the hammer of doom.

Watt and Darwin jerked upright. Boulton did not react at all.

"Happens every night of the year," he said cheerfully. "Creditors or councilmen or couriers. Seeing it's close to Christmas, maybe it's carolers. Musgrave will see to them. Go on, 'Rasmus. You were, I think, about to enlarge on the uses of tartar of vitriol."

Darwin was not listening; or rather, he listened to something else: voices resounding in the slate-floored and oak-paneled entrance hall.

"Another place setting, I think," he said, wiping his hands absentmindedly on the edge of the tablecloth. "If you will permit me to bring another guest to dinner."

"Bring twenty if you wish." Boulton indicated with a wave of his hand one of many vacant spaces. "Right there. But I didn't know you were expecting visitors."

"No more was I." Darwin did not stand up but pushed his chair away from the table to give more space for his belly. As the door was opened and another man ushered in, he nodded in

satisfaction. "Jacob: I thought I recognized your bark. Jimmy Watt, may I introduce Colonel Jacob Pole of Radburn Hall, my friend and neighbor. Matthew, you and Jacob already know each other. What's it like outside?"

"Cold as Jack Frost's backside." Pole greeted the other two men formally but added, "'Rasmus talks so much about you, I feel I know you well."

"And what does he say about us?" Watt, unlike Darwin, had stood up when Pole entered.

"He says that James Watt is one of the great engineers of our time and Matthew Boulton is this nation's leading innovator of new machines." Pole was tall and gaunt, so thin his clothes hung loosely on him.

He walked across to the fireplace and stood facing it. His complexion gleamed sallow in the firelight, and the trembling hands that he held out to be warmed told of other legacies of foreign travel.

"Then sit down, man." Boulton waved to an unused setting at the table. "Even if you have eaten, those words deserve a second meal."

"In a moment." Pole hesitated, glancing from one man to the next. "I find myself in a difficult position. I am not alone, but with the cousin of my own oldest friend. He is outside in



the hall. He greatly desires to speak with Erasmus. But I cannot disturb your dinner."

"Of course you can. You already did." Boulton started forward as though to head for the door. Pole's uplifted hand stopped him.

"Let me be more honest with you. I thought that I would meet Erasmus on his way home and there would be a chance of private conversation. It was not until we were at the factory that I learned he'd come here. Now I don't know what to do. You see, the man with me has a problem that he describes as both private and personal."

"A medical problem?" Darwin sat up straighter.

"I do not know."

"I see. Gentlemen?" Darwin glanced at Watt and Boulton.

"I don't know about his personal problem or whether he chooses to talk about it in front of us." Boulton once again moved to the door. "I do know that it's not right to leave a visitor cold and hungry and waiting in the hall. Sit down, Jacob. At the very least, have food and drink. Mulled wine will bring some warmth to your bones."

"And food will add flesh to them." Darwin gestured to the table. "That veal and ham pie is the best that I have tasted this year. Trust me."

Boulton was returning with a

man so muffled against the elements that his build and features were hard to determine. Frost on his eyebrows, mustache, and full black beard was slowly melting and running down his face and cloak.

"Thomas Solborne," Boulton said, "who is from Dorset. A county, he tells me, that is a good deal warmer than this one."

"Which would not be difficult tonight at least. Gentlemen." Solborne spoke with the soft accent of the English southwest. He swept off his hat, with its long peak and earflaps, and was revealed as a florid man of about thirty, wigless and with abundant black hair that curled down over his ears. He bowed from the waist, scanned the group, and addressed Darwin directly. "Dr. Darwin, I know I'm intruding. Take my word, it was not planned this way."

"What did Jacob say, look for the fat one?" Again Darwin gestured to a place at the table. "Please, Mr. Solborne, sit down. It was not planned, you say? *Nothing* of today's events seems planned. I had thought to sleep in my own bed tonight. Let me, without delay, tell you my own feelings. Jacob has already intimated to us why you are here. Everyone in this room, except of course for yourself, is an old and trusted friend of mine. I value



and rely on their discretion. You have a problem about which I so far know nothing save that it is a private concern. If you choose to describe it here and now, you will find sympathetic ears and close lips. If you wish to defer discussion until we are alone, that too will be quite acceptable. We will eat, drink, relax, and spend the evening in pleasant conversation."

Solborne was slowly shedding layers of clothing: woollen gloves, two cloaks, a long scarf, and a leather jacket. He was revealed as a man of medium and unathletic build, slightly overweight. "Eat, drink, and talk. Those I may accomplish; but it is two months and more since I could last relax. The purpose of my visit to these parts was to meet Jacob and thereby seek access to you. Your reputation in the southern counties is unequalled. You are often said to be the last resort in difficult medical cases."

"I am flattered." Darwin did not sound surprised.

"And also in—certain other matters." For the first time Solborne hesitated. "I face a problem which may be medical but which, quite frankly, points beyond the natural. I know that you reject such explanations."

"That puts the matter too strongly. I will not admit a supernatural explanation when a

natural one can be found. And I should add in my experience that has always been the case."

"But in *this* case . . ." Solborne spread out his hands. They were neat, well-kept, and had clearly seen no manual labor. He had placed food on his plate at Matthew Boulton's urging but not touched it. "I'm sorry. I don't know where to begin."

"At any point. We're not building a house here, where the foundation and walls must perforce be completed before the roof goes on." Darwin smiled his ruined smile. "We can return as necessary, and fill in any missing elements. The whole evening is ours. The most important thing is to give full detail and omit nothing. Detail is at the heart of diagnosis. Consider this a medical task whether or not it proves at length to be so."

"Very well." Solborne finally, almost reluctantly, took a draught of red wine. "As Mr. Boulton mentioned, I am from Dorset. In fact, I hail from the farthest southern point of that county, near the tip of the peninsula known as Portland Bill. The Bill juts out into the English Channel, and my house sits on the western cliffs a couple of miles above it—am I giving too much detail, of no consequence to the matter?"



"We have, as yet, no way of knowing what may be relevant. Please continue."

"My family is of old Dorset stock. We trace the Dorset Solbornes back almost to the Conquest. It is debated whether the family takes its name from the nearby village of Solborne, or the village its name from the family. In any case my ancestors have lived there five hundred years and more." Thomas Solborne caught the impatient look on Watt's face and grimaced ruefully. "I tell you this, Mr. Watt, not as presumed evidence of superiority but rather as an admission of possible family defects. I have some knowledge of animal husbandry. I know the problems likely to arise from too close breeding."

Darwin leaned forward. "Physical problems?"

"In animals. In the case of my own family I may be referring to mental problems. Please be assured I do not find it easy to talk of these matters."

"I understand. And you should be assured that although you have our full sympathy, you will receive from me—from all of us—the most logical and dispassionate analysis we are able to provide. Nothing, of course, will go beyond this room."

"Thank you. I will try to omit nothing, no matter how painful or personal.

"I am thirty-one years old, and I have one sister, Helen, eight years younger than I. My parents died within six months of each other three years ago. The family estate of course passed to me, but Helen is unmarried and she and I both live at Newlands. That is the family home, one hundred and seventy years old. It was badly in need of renovation, and Helen and I have undertaken to accomplish that.

"We restored the crumbling mortar—"

"Excuse me." Darwin held up a pudgy hand. "You say, 'we restored.' I suspect that you did not perform the work yourself. Would you clearly distinguish between your own acts, and those accomplished by others?"

"If it helps. We brought in workmen who restored the crumbling mortar and replaced lost brick—the whole of Newlands is brick-built except for twin towers of stone, one on the north and one on the south side. We had much of the woodwork replaced, wherever we found dry rot. Do you need to know the cost of these actions?"

"Was it a significant drain on your finances?"

"Not really. We have land and revenues in other parts of Dorset. Both Helen and I are fortunate enough to possess substantial independent means."

"Then let us continue. If nec-



essary we will return to consider finances."

"The rebuilding that I've described took a long time to accomplish, but six months ago we were ready to take the next step: refurbishing the interior. New drapes, carpets cleaned or replaced, reupholstering of furniture, and so forth. In this area we knew that Helen would receive little help from me. I am not, technically speaking, color-blind, but I am close enough to it for my color aesthetic to be worthless. She, on the other hand, possesses a strong artistic sense. We agreed that I would be involved in financial decisions but all other choices would be hers.

"Naturally, selections could not be made while sitting at Newlands. Helen would have to travel to Dorchester, twenty miles north, or even as far as Bristol, seventy miles away, where a wide variety of materials and designs were available. I had no qualms about that. She has traveled before without me, even to the Continent, and she has always had considerable independence of spirit." Solborne paused and took a deep breath, giving the impression that there was a lot more to be said on the subject. The listeners waited patiently.

"For example," he said at last, "I don't know your views on ei-

ther politics or foreign affairs, but as mark of Helen's independent views, let me say that while I greatly oppose last year's revolt of the American colonies, she rejoices in it."

Darwin glanced at Watt, Pole, and Boulton before he replied. "We are of mixed opinions. Myself, I hope for the ultimate success of the breakaway colonies. The more troubling question is, will it lead to other revolutions, closer to home?"

Matthew Boulton nodded vigorously and leaned forward.

"That is exactly what I tell Erasmus. We are all of us firm monarchists here—quiet, Jimmy." Watt had made a sound between a grunt and an asthmatic wheeze, and Boulton turned to him. "I know you favor the Young Pretender, but still you crave a monarch, even if he does not happen to be King George. Mr. Solborne, I have traveled much in Europe since the revolt in the Americas. France is stirring. There is unrest and fear in the royal families of Bavaria and Bohemia. The Margrave of Brandenburg has formed a special guard to seek out revolutionaries. Where will it end? Where *should* it end?"

"We will certainly hold that debate—on another occasion." Darwin held an open palm out to Jacob Pole, who sat frowning

and waiting for his turn to speak. "Peace, Jacob. The floor belongs to Mr. Solborne."

The visitor, unfamiliar with the digressive give-and-take of Lunar Society members, had been sitting bewildered. At Darwin's "If you please, continue," he nodded.

"As I was saying, despite her young age and strong opinions, Helen is familiar with the ways of the world. Or so I thought."

Solborne fell silent again until Darwin coaxed him: "Tell us about her. What does she look like, what are her interests?"

"She is as fair as I am dark. Friends have told us it is an astonishment that two so different in appearance could be born from a single womb. She is short in stature, even for a woman. Helen claims five feet, but I suspect the final inch. Dainty in features and form. Men apparently find her attractive, since she turns heads at every market, fair, or gala. They pursue her. She sheds them with ease."

"She lacks interest in men?"

"Say rather that Helen is more interested in other things. I mentioned her artistic sense. That is secondary to her interest in philosophy and her gift for mathematics. Few men can tolerate more than five minutes of Euclid, Archimedes, Spinoza, and Newton. They come, they listen, and they leave shaking

their heads. So when Helen made a visit to Bristol to examine brocades, and wrote to say that she had been given an opportunity to see the demonstration of an extraordinary mathematical device, I was not in the least astonished—not then, or when she extended her stay by three days to learn more about what she had seen. I was, however, much surprised one week later when she returned to Newlands. She was not alone. She had with her Professor Anton Riker of Bordeaux and his extraordinary calculating engine. Have you heard of it?"

The others turned to Darwin. His grey eyes were thoughtful, and in them stirred something that Jacob Pole at least had seen before: an overwhelming and insatiable curiosity. "I know of the calculator built by Monsieur Pascal over a century ago," he said slowly, "which performed addition and subtraction by mechanic device. I am familiar with the improved version constructed by Herr Gottfried Leibniz a generation later which also permitted multiplication and division. But the name of Professor Riker is new to me."

"As it was to me and to Helen. She insisted that the professor, together with his machine, visit Newlands. Let me say that initially I was surprised by the appearance of a guest but not dis-

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 turbed. It was only later that my aversion to Professor Riker developed."

"His description, too, if you will."

"Above middle height and thinner than Colonel Pole. According to Helen, his eyes are grey with a tawny center and he possesses a gaze of peculiar intensity, but I cannot speak to that myself since he has not once met my eye. He has an accent to his speech, something I think of Central Europe, but I don't have ear or experience enough to place it. He is courtly and charming in manner, but it seems the false charm of a dancing master or an actor."

"Seems to you."

"You are very perceptive, Dr. Darwin. Helen and I disagree strongly. She cannot see beyond his brilliance. Which in truth appears to be very great. The performance of the Riker calculating engine defies description."

"I will nonetheless request that you attempt it."

"I knew you would. Here." Solborne reached into a pocket of his leather jacket and produced a folded sheet of paper, thick and the color of clotted cream. "This is not my drawing. It is Helen's."

Darwin unfolded the sheet and held it close to one of the candelabra while the other four crowded around. The main line

drawing was in green ink and filled half the sheet. An expanded detail of one part was shown above.

"I have seen it for myself," Solborne said. "This is accurate as to both layout and proportion. Here on the flat upper surface—" he touched the upper part of the sheet "—you see nine keys or levers. Here are nine more. Each lever has ten possible settings, for the numbers zero through nine. Thus it is possible to define two numbers, each with up to nine digits. This is an eight-way lever that controls the *operation* of the engine. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and the extraction of roots up to fifth order. And here—" he touched the paper again "—is where a number of up to eighteen digits appears. It is contained on a strip of paper, and it is *printed*, as by controlled type."

"Are these dimensions accurate?" Darwin was crouched with his nose almost to the paper.

"They are. The whole engine, including its base, is two feet wide, three feet deep, and rather less than three feet high. It is also heavy, ten stone or more."

"Ah." Darwin leaned back, his face sad and oddly disappointed. "Then I am obliged to question the inventive genius of Professor Anton Riker. There was,

eight years ago, on display in the court of Emperor Joseph of Austria—”

“The automaton chess player of Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen, which took the form of a seated Turk.”

“You know of it.”

“Certainly. It was no automaton but relied upon a hidden accomplice. The device was otherwise impossible.”

“I am not persuaded of that. Before Von Kempelen’s secret was revealed, Mr. Solborne, I wasted an inordinate amount of my time and foolscap seeking to define a possible mechanism. I was unable to prove that such a chess-playing machine is impossible *theoretically*; only that it would be prodigious complicated and probably enormous in size.”

“Those observations would be yet more true of this ‘calculating engine.’ Dr. Darwin, my first response was yours exactly. This new machine, like the chess automaton, must be operated by some confederate of Professor Riker. Helen soon convinced me otherwise.”

“First of all, the machine stands alone, not on some specially constructed dais or platform able to conceal a man. It works in bright light with everything visible rather than in obscuring gloom. The Von Kempelen device was operated using a system of balls and magnets,

impossible in this case. Finally, and far more important, consider what the engine *does*: the printed output is the result of a difficult arithmetic calculation, and it normally appears within thirty seconds of the complete statement of the problem. The input numbers are provided not by Riker but by the audience—I have done it myself. There is no way that an assistant could know the problems in advance. Even with the use of tables it would be impossible to provide the cubic root or quartic root of a nine figure number, or the product of two such numbers, so quickly.”

“True enough.” Darwin pouted his full lips. “So we have a mystery.”

He seemed ready to settle back into brooding silence, but Solborne would not allow it. He took the sheet from Darwin and returned it to his jacket pocket.

“A mystery, perhaps, but not *the* mystery. I would not travel so far afield in winter merely for the sake of some calculating device. My concern is with Helen, and Professor Riker. I have already told you that I didn’t care for him, and I asked Helen that his stay at Newlands not be an extended one. He and his machine departed three days after their arrival, during which time he offered me numerous demonstrations of the engine’s power.

Then he left—but he did not go far. He rented a small house along the cliff, less than half a mile from Newlands, where he lives alone. And from that day forward I saw the decline in Helen."

"Melancholic?"

"Not at all. I saw—and see—physical decline. She has been losing weight steadily. She was always fair, but now her skin seems almost translucent. Her eyes are set deeper in her head, and the skin beneath them appears to be almost purple, as though bruised."

"And her manner?"

"Febrile, intense, yet cheerful. She seems distant from me in a way that I have never before experienced. When I ask concerning her health, she says only that she is feeling tired and doesn't seem able to get enough sleep. That is certainly true. She will nod off during dinner or as soon as she sits down in a chair. I wonder what is happening."

It was Darwin's turn to hesitate. "Mr. Solborne," he said at last. "It pains me to suggest this, but I assume that the obvious explanation has occurred to you?"

"That Helen and Riker are romantically engaged and she spends her nights with him? Of course. It is not the case."

"How do you know?"

"By taking an action that was

not strictly honorable. As I told you, the main body of Newlands, including parlors, guest bedrooms, drawing room, dining rooms, and servants' quarters, is of brick. However, there are two towers of stone, one to the north and one to the south side, rising from the main house. I have a suite of rooms, including my bedroom and study, in the north tower. Helen occupies the southern one, with her bedroom and parlor and sewing room. There are two doors to each tower. One leads into it from the main body of the house; the other—seldom used and originally built, I suspect, for use only in case of fire—opens directly from the outside; from a path that runs along the cliff. It runs, in fact, to and past the house rented by Anton Riker. Suspecting Helen's actions, I did two things. First, I placed locks on the outside of the tower doors. No one could then enter or leave Newlands without passing through the main body of the house. The only window in the south tower that can be opened wide enough to admit a person is near the top, overlooking a forty foot sheer drop to stony ground.

"Second, I moved Jeanie Rowland, one of the servants who happens to be an unusually light sleeper, to a bedroom next to the inner door of the south



tower. She was instructed to tell me if she heard any comings and goings at night."

"And did she?"

"Not a one. She said that she heard Helen—or someone—moving around in the tower, often late at night when the rest of the house was asleep. But Helen never left her quarters."

"A necessary condition for chastity but not a sufficient one." Darwin stirred in his chair. "Mr. Solborne, when I was a student at Cambridge, it constantly baffled me that there was a rule forbidding the presence of ladies in college at night while open access was permitted to any woman during the day. An odd assumption seemed at work: that improprieties take place only at night. What of your sister's movements during the *daylight* hours?"

"Dr. Darwin, Jacob Pole warned me of your prescience. You have been looking into my mind."

"Not at all. I merely seek to close logical loopholes. During the day?"

"At close of day, which in this season means between four and five o'clock, Helen leaves Newlands and walks south along the cliff."

"To the house rented by Professor Riker?"

"That was my original assumption, that there was some

sort of assignation involved. But it is not the case. As she walks south, he walks north along the shingled cliff to meet her. They stand in full view and talk to each other for five or ten minutes as darkness approaches. They just talk. They do not touch. Before it is fully dark, they part, and she returns home."

"You have been spying on them?"

"I am very worried about my sister. Daily she has grown more pale and tense, more wan and bloodless."

"And now we have one more mystery to consider. Timing." Darwin did not elaborate but leaned forward in his seat and thoughtfully cut a wedge of Stilton. The room fell silent except for the sound of steady munching and the wheeze of James Watt's asthmatic breathing.

"You seem to anticipate everything else." Solborne finally broke the silence. "So perhaps you have some notion of my real concern—the one I find so improbable that I am reluctant to voice it. The fear that brought me to you."

"Surely." Darwin licked his fingers. "All the components are present, are they not? Put aside, for the moment, the question of the calculating engine. Then we have a young woman who en-

the Continent, perhaps from the central regions of Europe. Rapidly she comes under his sway. They meet every day but only when the sun has gone from the sky. Access to her quarters cannot be obtained at night except through a high window set in a vertical wall, inaccessible to mortal man. She never goes out after dark, yet every day she becomes weaker until she is as pale as though the blood itself were draining from her veins. Every day her intensity of manner increases but so does her indifference to ordinary events. To anyone with a knowledge of European folklore, especially Slavonic traditions, a possible inference is clear."

"I have seen no puncture wounds on her skin, but Professor Riker is a—"

"An inference that is clear yet is also total nonsense. Life on earth admits a huge variety of forms, but everywhere there is a logic, whereby form follows function. I can no more believe in *Das Wampyr* than I can believe in Sinbad's roc, a bird so large that it feeds on elephants. By the simple law of proportions, such a creature could never lift itself from the ground. And such a being as *Nosferatu*, the vampire, hated by all men but totally helpless during the daytime,

could never survive the centuries."

"But if Riker is not that—that thing—then what is he? And if not he, then what is doing this to my sister?"

"I do not know."

Darwin placed his hands over his paunch. The fatigue of the late afternoon had vanished, and again he was eyeing the dish of smoked eels.

"At this moment I honestly do not know. But I assure you, Thomas Solborne, that we will find out."

My dear Erasmus,
I told you, did I not, that I was the wrong man for your job? And a pox on it, I was right. Tom Solborne hasn't said one word, but I'm sure he thinks I'm about as much use here as tits on a bull. . . .

Alone in the coach, Darwin tapped Jacob Pole's letter on his knee, leaned back, and allowed himself to rock back and forward with the sway of the steady movement.

The problem was, Jacob was right. He wasn't the first—or even the second. But what option had offered itself? Solborne had arrived at the height of the season for winter ailments, when Darwin's *locum tenens* was already pressed into ser-



vice elsewhere. Jimmy Watt was deep in the wreckage of his engine, in that mood of solitary thought that made him seem scarcely human. Transported to Dorset, he would see only steam. As for Matthew Boulton, he ran the great Soho factory under his own absolute control, and he could not be spared for a day, still less a week.

Darwin comforted himself with the thought that a fortnight was not much time for Jacob to hold the fort, no matter how long it might seem to him.

On the other hand, if Helen Solborne were to die . . .

Darwin longed for a report from a man with his own keen diagnostic eye for medical matters. Jacob had not been pressed into service, he had gone willingly enough, but he could no more read the *facies* of impending death or disease than he could swim unaided from Dorset to the coast of France. How sick was Helen Solborne?

She's an attractive little woman, and she said hello to me polite enough. But Solborne is right, a lot of the time she doesn't seem to be all there. And Lord knows what she's talking about the rest of the time. Two days ago she asked me if I knew of some Italian type called Fibonacci, and his successions. I asked her if he was that Italian

general who'd fought against Austria in the War of the Polish Succession, and she laughed like I'd made the biggest joke in the world and said that Fibonacci had been a good deal earlier and a much greater man, and when she said successions she meant sequences. That was one of our better conversations. Afterwards, Tom said she'd been talking about her mathematics. God help the man who marries her. . . .

Helen Solborne did not sound like an easy dupe—or an easy subject for her brother's control. Darwin glanced down at the letter sitting on his knee. He had read it often enough to be sure that the information he sought would not be found there. Jacob was too full of his own opinions and interests to serve as impartial observer.

. . . looks of a starved Spaniard, or maybe a Portugee, though his accent says Hungary or even farther south and east. Either way, I'd bet money that his original name isn't Riker. I followed him into Dorchester and watched him wander until he found a shop that suited him. He ordered a ton of food and spices delivered to that house he rents, most of it foreign muck as bad as any I've seen in Egypt or the Indies. No wonder he's thin

as a rail. He probably eats like a cormorant, but I'll wager the stuff goes right through him. And the amount of it! You'd be hard pressed to put away all he ordered, 'Rasmus, and you'd make two of him in size.

Two of him in size. Darwin leaned his head back on the stuffed leather of the coach seat, eyes closed but deep in thought. They were skirting the chalky slopes of the Western Downs, rumbling down to Dorchester and Weymouth. Portland was a couple of hours away. The tempering effect of the English Channel could already be felt in the milder air.

Darwin turned to another page of Pole's letter.

Jacob might not be the best judge of exotic foreigners or of talented young women, but he had other strengths. He evaluated terrain and landscape with the practical eye of a soldier and the methodical approach of a first-rate artillery engineer.

The west side of the Portland peninsula, where Newlands stands, is actually a continuation of a curious feature of the mainland known as Chesil Bank. The bank is a shingle beach that runs offshore of the mainland all its length, eight miles and more. A body of water called The Fleet runs between

bank and mainland. On the peninsula, however, the bank comes ashore, rises higher, and is more than thirty feet above the sea by the time it reaches Newlands. And Newlands is built on top of that bank. Tom Solborne said that the high window of the south tower was forty feet up. But that's from ground level. Add in the height of the bank, and the window is more like seventy feet above the water. I checked the wall beneath. It has smooth facings of white freestone. The only way to get in that window would be to fly in, unless a man could run up the sheer wall like a human spider.

You can also dismiss the idea of Helen Solborne, like Rapunzel, lowering a rope down to a waiting lover. He would have to be sitting in a boat and he'd get only one grab—the tide runs fast along this part of the shore.

Next I examined the door locks. They are padlocks, simple enough for someone with experience. I, for my sins, had them open in a half a minute, without a key. However, the locks cannot be reached from inside the tower. The only other possibility would seem to be an accomplice, opening the lock from outside. In the next day or two I therefore propose an all-night vigil outside the south tower. It's not as cold here as in Birmingham or Derby, but there's a dampness



that blows in from the sea. Bring plenty of your pills and nostrums with you—I'll likely need them for my creaking bones.

From habit Darwin patted the medical chest at his side. He might indeed need the contents for Jacob Pole, using them to treat the colonel's agues from tropical service; he was more and more convinced that any standard pharmacopeia would be useless in dealing with Helen Solborne.

Thomas Solborne was waiting as the coach rattled up the Newlands gravel drive.

"Quickly now," he said, helping Darwin down the double step. "There will never be a better time. What delayed you?"

The sun was setting, and a thick fog was creeping in from the sea.

"Broken traces just beyond Wyke Regis." Darwin was already surveying the house and shoreline. "Where is Colonel Pole?"

Solborne pointed to a narrow road leading to the left. "Helen went for her afternoon walk and rendezvous. Jacob again agreed to follow her—discreetly—while I waited for you."

"What is her condition?"

"Deteriorating, at least to my eye. But Helen is of indomitable will. She admits only to a slight

fatigue. Let us hurry. We have perhaps twenty minutes."

He led the way through the double doors at the front of the house. The entrance hall was long and wide, furnished with massive Oriental standing vases and gloomy suits of old armor.

Darwin peered down at the polished floor. "Purbeck marble? I have never seen it before except in churches."

"It's mined locally. It is beautiful, wears forever—and is diabolically cold in winter. Were it not for Helen's strong views and preferences, I would cover everything with carpets."

Solborne was walking to the left, where a long curved staircase led upward to the next level. Darwin, still motionless in the entrance, saw an identical stair at the other end. He was forming in his mind a picture of the house's layout and dimensions. Beyond the stairs must lie another room and then the towers.

"Newlands was built with a high degree of symmetry." Solborne had turned, aware that Darwin was not following. "The north and south ends of the main building form a matched pair. But it is better if you see the tower containing Helen's suite of rooms."

"It is best if I see everything." Darwin, moving after the other man, ran his hand along the

smooth curve of the banister. It was polished and free of dust.

The staircase brought them to an antechamber with two doors. One, open, led to a dining room thirty-five feet long and with a log fire blazing on the seaward side. A huge table of gleaming mahogany and eighteen chairs dominated the middle of the room. The other door of the antechamber was closed. Solborne opened it without knocking and went through.

"Jeanie Rowland's bedroom." He pointed to the left where still another door stood ajar. "Jeanie spends every night here."

"What is her relationship with Helen?"

"I thought of that also. It is respectful, but not close. There is no chance that Jeanie would jeopardize her future at Newlands by serving as Helen's accomplice." Solborne was at a door in a blank wall of white stone, no more than five feet from Jeanie Rowland's room. "And this provides the only inside entrance to the south tower."

Darwin examined the door as they passed through. It was paneled and not particularly thick. It would not muffle sounds from its other side. He bent low and looked at the latch with special care, checking that it had no lock.

Beyond lay a large chamber,

its octagonal shape matching the outside figure of the stone tower. A tight spiral staircase of iron filigree led down to the tower's outside entrance. Darwin did not attempt a descent—with his bulk it would have been a tight fit—but asked, "Is the outer lock still in position?"

"In position and, according to Colonel Pole, untouched. He inserted a dab of candle grease into the padlock. It remains undisturbed."

The two men began their ascent of the wider stair that followed the outer wall of the tower. One level brought them to Helen Solborne's sitting-room and study, with its own fireplace and south-facing window. Darwin tried to open it, and grunted.

"As you see." Solborne came to his side, and pushed hard on the casement. "A couple of inches of travel, no more. Not an entrance or an exit."

"For a human." Darwin was lingering over the many books. Solborne gave him an uneasy glance and dragged him away. Ten minutes had passed since the arrival of the coach.

The next floor was a plain bedroom, above it a sewing room. Packets of furniture-covering materials sat on every available surface.

"One more." Solborne had noticed that Darwin was breath-



ing heavily. "And the only one with a window that can open wide. Up we go."

Full-length mirrors stood on all walls of the last story, throwing multiple reflections of both men. "As you see, Helen's dressing-room. The morning light is excellent because the window faces southeast."

He went across and threw it open. The heavily curtained window looked out over the sea. The fog was thickening, and a curl of mist drifted in. Darwin joined him and looked out over a sheer drop. After a few moments he leaned one shoulder out and turned to peer upward. A gutter ran around the top of the tower about eight feet above his head. He craned to look to the right, but the roof of the house itself was hidden around the curve of the tower.

"Fifteen minutes," Solborne said nervously. "Do you see anything?"

"Enough."

"Then we'd best be getting down again." He led the way, only to have Darwin pause near the door and bend to examine a pair of heavy brass oil lamps.

"For dressing here after dark." Solborne waited impatiently. "On the occasions when Helen can be persuaded to attend a social evening gathering—which is rare indeed."

He breathed more easily once

they were out of the tower and in the long dining room. "Is there anything else you wish to see in the house itself before Helen returns?"

"The roof of this part of Newlands." And when Solborne stared, "It would, I think, be impossible for mortal human to ascend that sheer stone face. But it might be easy indeed to descend it."

"Ah!" Solborne's face lit with sudden understanding. "From the tower top, with the assistance of a rope. There is roof access through the attic."

He was already running for the stairs, and by the time Darwin had negotiated three flights and reached the attic level, Solborne had opened a dusty roof skylight. He stood outside in approaching darkness.

One glance was sufficient for both men. Solborne turned to his visitor and shook his head. The tower top stood a full fifteen feet above them. There was no sign of a ladder or anything else that might assist in scaling the tower.

"What now?"

"We think again." Darwin, if anything, seemed pleased, as though some less interesting alternative had been disposed of. He led the way back down. When they emerged into the dining room a middle-aged woman with a thin, tight-lipped

face was waiting for them. She examined Darwin, grimy and covered with cobwebs, with plenty of curiosity but spoke at once to Solborne.

"It's happened again, sir. We had eight gallons or more, now we have less than two. Someone is pilfering—and it isn't me nor Jeanie nor Liza."

"I am sure it isn't. I trust all of you completely." Solborne frowned, and muttered as though to himself, "As if I didn't have enough on my mind!" And then, to the indignant woman, "There's only one thing for it, Dolly. Have Walter carry the barrels inside and set them in the scullery. That way no one can wander along the road and steal our oil."

He turned to Darwin. "Mineral oil is in short supply this year, and winter prices are high. But never before have I found it necessary to guard our house reserves."

In the few minutes that they had been up on the roof, the big lamps around the walls of the dining room had been lit and trimmed. On a low table a few feet from Darwin, loaded dishes had magically appeared. There were plates of boiled prawns, vinegared mussels and whelks, and hot sausage rolls, as well as a cold rhubarb tart, jugs of fresh milk, and a flagon of apple wine. Before Darwin could take a step

in that direction, a cloaked figure entered through the door at the far end.

Solborne shot Darwin a look that said "Not a minute to spare!" and stood waiting. Helen Solborne sauntered toward them, eyeing Darwin with as much curiosity and interest as he regarded her.

He decided in the first moment of inspection that both Thomas Solborne and Jacob Pole were right. She was tiny, five feet at most, with skin so fine and pale that the lamplight seemed to shine right through her skull. Although her figure was swathed in a long cloak, it was clear from her face that she was thinner than fashion demanded. She blinked constantly as though the oil lamps were too bright, and dark shadows limned her blue eyes.

But those eyes were fiercely intelligent, and the jaw firm. She looked Darwin right in the eye, and the little curtsey she offered seemed like a private joke between the two of them.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, Dr. Darwin. If even as many as one fourth of Colonel Pole's stories about you are true, I await dinner tonight more eagerly than I can say."

Darwin folded his hands across his belly and bowed in return. "I am no more than a provincial physician with most

of my life taken up by the common round of routine medical treatment. Extravagant advance billing of an entertainment, Miss Solborne, is perhaps the surest way of ensuring high disappointment."

"And extravagant modesty is perhaps the surest sign of high self-esteem." She smiled, to reveal white teeth with a slight overbite. "My anticipation is undiminished. If you will excuse me, I must change now or be late for dinner."

As she drifted away through the door to the south tower, Solborne could not wait a moment longer.

"Well? What can you tell me?"

"I can tell you that I fully understand why the would-be suitors flock around Helen. Your sister is a most attractive woman."

"I mean about her *health*."

"My remark was not irrelevant to that issue. Sickness, true and serious sickness, is inconsistent with normal animal attraction. At some level, by smell or the natural language of the body, we respond to another's state of health. However, you desire a more formal diagnosis. I'm willing to provide one although I have had no more than an opportunity for superficial observation of your sister."

"And?"

"She appears in good health.

Her gait, her posture, her willingness to indulge in badinage—yes, even her *cheekiness* toward me—all deny major disease."

"But you never saw her before. I assure you, she is *different* from the way she was three months ago."

"I believe you. And on that subject I am not bereft of ideas. However, I need proof. Did you invite Professor Riker this evening as I requested?"

"Naturally. I walked down to his house this morning and told him that, as a noted inventor from the Midlands, you would be devastated were you to visit Dorset and depart without an opportunity to see the famous calculating engine at work."

"Was there hesitation on his part?"

"Not the slightest. He told me that he will be very busy for the next two weeks, exhibiting the engine, but at the moment he has time to breathe. He will be delighted to come here tonight after dinner, when he will show you the machine at work and allow you to propound your own mathematical questions. We can expect him and his machine within the hour. I freely admit to you I do not share his delight at the prospect of his visiting Newlands. I am still convinced that he is doing my sister some terrible harm."

"Whatever harm is being done

here, I am not yet ready to blame Professor Riker."

"Harm? Harm?" Jacob Pole, bustling in with his fingers and the tip of his nose a rosy pink, headed for the fireplace. He lifted the tail of his long coat, allowing the warmth from the blazing logs to irradiate his buttocks and the backs of his legs. "Welcome to Dorset, 'Raasmus. It's a raw and foggy night out there. I'll tell you one thing, if anyone comes to harm from all this it will be me. Tom can vouch for it, I've been out in all hours and all weathers, chilblains on my fingers and now scorchmarks on my backside. I'm glad to be in for the night."

Darwin glanced at Thomas Solborne and sat down at the side table for a pre-dinner snack. It did not seem like the best moment to mention that Jacob, if Darwin's plans held good, was likely to be outside again before the evening was out.

The calculating engine corresponded exactly to Helen Solborne's drawing. Riker had requested that the demonstration begin as soon as possible after dinner, "since I have business tonight in Abbotsbury, that cannot easily be delayed."

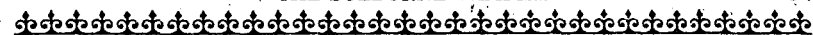
Two of the male staff of Newlands had carried the heavy rectangular box into one end of the dining room, grunting with effort, while Anton Riker hovered

over them and told them twenty times that the engine must not under any circumstances be dropped.

Once the machine was in position, Riker called his audience's attention to the main features. The top, two feet wide and three feet deep, was of smooth hardwood coated with black lacquer. Two separate sets of nine levers were hinged at the upper surface. One additional lever allowed the operator to define the desired operation. All the levers projected upwards to form handles, and also continued below the surface, where their articulated brass rods were visible through the glass sides of the engine. Riker demonstrated the action, moving a lever to one of its ten possible settings. As he did so, the corresponding brass arm, jointed in two places, pushed into the opaque base of the engine. The base was roughly one foot deep, and each arm penetrated smoothly into its own separate slit in its upper surface.

There was one more slit in the base of the engine. It was very narrow and about two inches long, no more than six inches from the ground; it held a strip of cardboard or stiff paper.

The operator stood, or sat on a low stool, in front of the machine.



"For example, take this problem," Riker said after he had pointed out the different settings. He set the right-hand lever of the upper set to the digit 2, and the right-hand lever of the lower set to the digit 3. Finally he moved the operations lever to the setting that indicated multiplication. The actions of his skeletally thin fingers were deft and precise, and he hardly seemed to look at what he was doing. After a pause of about twenty seconds, long enough for his audience to become restive, there was a clicking noise from the engine's base. The strip of cardboard advanced in its position from the side slot. Riker tore it off and held it out to the audience.

Jacob Pole took the stiff paper and stared at the single printed digit. "Six," he said. "Two times three. Hmph."

"Not impressed?" Riker raised his dark eyebrows. "I agree. We could all of us do as well, could we not? But come here, please, and sit down."

Pole, somewhat reluctantly, was installed on the stool.

"Now, enter a number with these." Riker touched the upper row of levers. "Any number that you like, up to nine figures."

The colonel, after a moment's thought, moved the levers to indicate 4-3-2-1.

"Very good. And now, a number with the lower levers."

"One-two-three-four. Is that all right?"

"Quite suitable. Go ahead. And now, specify an operation."

"Multiply?"

"Certainly, if that is what you would like. Move the lever."

There was a sound of metal on metal as the operation lever engaged. This time the silence lasted less than ten seconds. A series of clicks sounded from the base, and another cardboard strip emerged from the slot.

Riker indicated the base without touching anything. "Tear it off."

Pole did so, and frowned down at it.

"Read what it says, Colonel Pole."

"It says 5-3-3-2-1-1-4. But how the devil am I supposed to know if that's right?"

"It will be correct, Colonel, believe me." Riker showed total self-confidence. He turned to Darwin. "Doctor, would you perhaps like to perform your own experiments?"

Darwin had been hovering close, like a child forbidden to touch a new toy. He nodded at once.

Pole gave up his seat and retreated to a corner of the room, frowning over the cardboard strip that he held. Darwin took Pole's place, his broad rump

overflowing the sides of the stool. He employed each feature of the engine systematically, one after another. He paid particular attention to the length of the pause that followed each problem, and he studied the printed output carefully as it emerged.

"It's right!" Pole returned from the corner where he had been scribbling on the slip of stiff paper. "Damme, I checked the answer by hand, and every digit is just as it should be. Professor, it's amazing."

"Would it not be stranger, Colonel Pole, if most were right and one was wrong?"

"But how the devil does it do it?"

Riker smiled indulgently. "That, sir, must remain my secret. Let me say that no clock-maker in Europe—no, in all the world—is able to construct its like." He turned to Darwin. "Your hosts have seen the engine in operation before, several times. Do you have questions?"

Darwin shook his head and hunched low on the stool.

"With your permission—" Riker addressed the waiting men-servants. "Take the engine and place it on my gig—and carefully." Then, to the Solbornes and their visitors, "I must be on my way to Abbotsbury as soon as the calculating engine is safely

housed. My apologies that I cannot stay longer."

The heavy machine was hauled downstairs and loaded carefully on board Riker's waiting gig. The professor bade goodnight to Darwin, who had followed him downstairs, and drove off. Darwin frowned after the light carriage, listening to the fading sound of the horse's hooves on the gravel. The fog of early evening had cleared, giving way to a faint and eerie sea mist that came and went at random.

Solborne was waiting anxiously when he went back upstairs.

"Well?"

"Where is your sister?"

"She has retired to her rooms, probably for the night. She pleads fatigue. But what of Riker?"

"I agree with you. He is not at all what he pretends to be."

"You mean, he is a—a—"

"I do not mean that he is a vampire. He is something much more ordinary, and possibly far more dangerous."

"But my sister—when he was here, did you not see the change in her? She gazed at him steadily, and she did not speak one word."

"It was not necessary. Everything was prearranged. Can you be at the front door, warmly clad, in five minutes?"



"Of course. But why?"

Darwin ignored the question. He went across to Jacob Pole, who sat smoking his pipe, spitting into the fire, and staring over and over again at the printed figures produced by Riker's calculating engine. "Jacob, stir yourself. Our work for the evening is not yet over."

"Eh?"

"You will see. Get your warmest clothes, and meet me by the front door in five minutes."

"Eh?"

"We are going to track down a vampire. What else?"

"We are going to *what*?" Pole jerked upright and dropped his pipe. "My pistols—"

"Will hardly help, I think." Darwin was already heading down the stairs to the main hall, where his own cloak and broadbrimmed hat had been hung on an antlered stand. "What possible use could pistols be," he said cheerfully over his shoulder, "against a vampire?"

Newlands stood close to the edge of the high seabank, which at this point of its southern course was a steep cliff dropping away to the water. Beyond the big house the shoreline ran in a concave curve. By walking fifty yards south, the three men could achieve a good view of the high tower containing Helen's suite of rooms. Beyond it, almost

invisible, stood the house's dimly lit central portion and the north tower.

Darwin brought them to a halt. Solborne gazed around at the dreary and silent horizon.

"What now? I don't see a thing."

"It may take a while. Keep your eyes there." Darwin's pudgy forefinger was pointing to the south tower, where the highest window was faintly visible as a dark outline in white stone.

Tom Solborne frowned, while Pole kept his hand on one of two pistols stuck in his belt. It was easy to imagine a dark shape hovering outside the curtained window or creeping up the smooth wall. Even if legend said that a lead ball would not work, it was certainly worth a try.

The wait stretched into twenty minutes while the air grew colder and the men shivered. Three minutes more and a series of creaking sounds disturbed the breathless night. They came from the upper levels of the white tower. "Very soon now," breathed Darwin.

"Where is it?" Solborne scanned the tower from top to bottom. "What is it? How does it get in?"

"Not in." A different sound was added to Darwin's words, the whirl of cords on pulleys. "Not in. *Out*."



Heavy curtains across the high window were suddenly drawn aside. A beam of light, faintly visible in the mist that still swirled along the shore, speared out over the sea. It shone for twenty seconds, then vanished behind closing curtains. Half a minute later the curtains opened and the light was visible again.

"Now." Darwin was already on the move. "While Helen is preoccupied. Quickly."

The others hurried after him into the main door of the house and up the left-hand stairs. They passed Jeanie Rowland's room, where Darwin paused long enough to look in on the startled girl and place a finger to his lips.

"Softly, now." He was opening the door to the south tower, slowly and silently. "I checked earlier that there is no lock here, but any loud sound would reveal our presence. Keep to the wall."

The advice was necessary. They were ascending the curved staircase in near total darkness. Up through the sitting room and study, up through the empty bedroom. Finally they reached the flight of stairs that led to the dressing room. With the other two right behind him Darwin paused at the closed door, then rapidly swung it wide.

The room beyond was a confusion of light and shadow, of

bright vertical bars marking boundaries for solid rectangles of darkness. That changed when Darwin seized one of the dark oblongs and spun it around on its axis. It became a full-length mirror, one of a dozen carefully placed around the walls of the room. Their glass picked up the light of four massive oil lamps in the middle of the chamber and reflected it as a single beam.

Helen Solborne had been crouched by the window. She swung around as the door opened, dropping the cord to the drapes. Darwin strode forward and decisively pulled the heavy curtains closed.

Helen remained kneeling, her face pale and tense. She did not speak, but shrank back at Jacob Pole's accusing shout.

"Wreckers, by God! You're a damned wrecker, setting up false lights to deceive mariners! If I hadn't seen this, I wouldn't have believed it."

"Do not believe it yet." Darwin snuffed the light of three of the lamps, leaving one to illuminate the room. He turned to Tom Solborne, standing open-mouthed in the doorway. "So much for your missing oil. Have there been reports of ships lost off this coast in the past few months?"

Solborne shook his head and stared at his sister.



"So it is not wreckers, Jacob," Darwin went on. "And it is not vampires. It is something with the potential to be more dangerous than both. It is *signals*, lights amplified by means of reflecting surfaces. I compliment you, Miss Solborne, on your mastery of light propagation and collimation." He waved his hand toward the array of mirrors. "But now it is over. Shall we then, as the bard advises, 'sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings?'"

"That was never our intent!" The blue eyes opened wide. "But you know. How can you? You arrived only this afternoon. Who told you? What told you?"

"No one told me. I know, not from a single major event but from an accumulation of many small ones. Now it is necessary that your brother know, too." When she remained silent, Darwin continued, "Come, Helen Solborne. This will serve better coming from you."

She shook her head and turned her eyes to her brother.

"No? Very well." Darwin pushed three tall mirrors out of the way and pulled forth the chairs that stood behind them. He gestured to the others to sit down. "Apparently I must begin. You, Miss Solborne, may correct me as necessary.

"Your brother came to see me concerned only for your welfare.

You had, he feared, fallen under some evil influence. I must admit my own first instinct upon hearing the circumstances was no more valid than his speculations on the undying monsters of Transylvania. For I thought of Dr. Franz Mesmer, whose 'animal magnetism' has allowed him for the past few years to achieve amazing control over subjects and patients in Vienna." Darwin regarded Helen Solborne with a definite glint of humor in his eye. "That theory did not survive my first exposure to you and Professor Riker. I judge you more likely to dominate and control *him* than vice-versa.

"Nonetheless, I was forced to take seriously your brother's concern that you were the slave of an evil circumstance. I suspect that he may think so still when he knows all. But I knew from my first look that you were—and are—not possessed by any demons but your own. You are suffering from one malady recognized by medical science: great fatigue. You have the look of someone who has seen no rest for many weeks. Of a woman, in fact, who occupies her nights providing signals that ships offshore are able to interpret."

"Smugglers!" Pole exclaimed. "They are running goods along Chesil Bank, and into The Fleet."



"Very true, Jacob." Darwin had one eye still on Helen Solborne. "Smugglers, however, who carry an unusual cargo. The Solborne family, as we were told on that first evening in Birmingham, does not lack for wealth. Can you see the mistress of Newlands, a lady of 'substantial independent means,' dealing in rope tobacco, Nantz brandy, or Alençon lace, when she can easily purchase them with her own funds?"

"It was a cargo more precious than lace," Helen said abruptly. "More valuable than gold or rubies. Brother, I seldom ask for anything, but I beg you, do not take this to the court. Promise me that, and I will tell you everything."

Solborne had not sat down. He stared at her in total confusion.

"He cannot promise what he does not understand," Darwin said mildly. "Tell him first, Miss Helen, then make your request."

"I cannot." And then, under Darwin's steady gaze, "But I must." She took a deep breath. "Very well. I will."

"Tom, you cannot guess how it distressed me when you thought me the devoted slave of that—that *mountebank*, Riker. He is nothing, merely an intermediary for others. What I am doing, I do because I choose, not because I am in any way *controlled*. And this did not begin

two months ago with my trip to Bristol. It began a full year earlier with my visit to France. I saw poverty there beyond imagining, people downtrodden and hopeless and reduced to animal existence. But in Paris I also met a group of men and women, small in numbers yet dedicated, who seek in France what was recently achieved by the American colonies: *freedom*."

"A revolt!"

"No, brother. A *revolution*. They cannot speak openly—King Louis, ineffectual as he seems, has ministers and minions both suspicious and bloodthirsty. Plans must be made in secret; in the churches, in the Paris catacombs, in the open fields, by sunlight and moonlight and candlelight. And still there is risk. When exposure comes too close, there is only one chance: the suspect must quit France entirely and fly to another country. I have helped those in peril to find sanctuary." Helen Solborne walked forward and took her brother by the hand. "Tom, I have deceived you for one reason only: I seek to save human lives."

"I believe you." But Solborne was not looking at her. "If King George found out—he already becomes demented at any mention of the American revolt—he would fear for the spread to

England; men would say treason . . .”

“And women would say compassion. Tom, I had no choice. Don't you see that.”

“It must stop, Helen. Tonight was the last time.”

“The secret is out now. I will agree—if you will not go to London and betray them. A score or more are here in England facing certain death on a return to France.”

“I will—think about it.” Solborne met his sister's eyes for the first time. He sat down on one of the straight-backed chairs. “If you can promise me that there is nothing else. Nothing more that you are concealing from me.”

“Brother, I will answer every question that you ask, openly and honestly. But do not betray those whose lives have depended on me.”

Darwin caught Jacob Pole's eye and jerked his head toward the door. “This is no part of our business,” he said softly as they headed down the stairs. “It is between Tom and Helen Solborne.”

“Will she persuade him?”

“She is his little sister. She will throw herself on his mercy, and he will be unable to resist her.”

“But 'Rasmus, this could be—treason.” Pole hissed the word.

“If anything like the Americas were to happen here . . .”

“It will not. King George is sane only north-northwest, but there is too much of a bottom of good sense in our people and parliament for revolution to be a danger. The Continent is different. You heard Matthew Boulton. France is stirring, there is unrest in Bavaria and Bohemia. The royal courts must look out for themselves. The problems in Europe run broad and deep.”

They had reached the bottom of the stairs and were passing Jeanie Rowland's room. She was standing by her bed in a long flannel nightgown, round-eyed and as far from sleep as anyone could be.

Darwin turned to Pole. “I feared as much. Jacob, will you do me a favor? Will you calm her fears and tell her that it is quite safe to go to bed?”

“Me? You are the one who knows all.”

“I lack your talent to soothe a lady's worries.”

“Rubbish! You *boast* of it. Oh, all right.” Pole turned into the bedroom. “You owe me, 'Rasmus,” he said over his shoulder. And then, in a confiding voice to Jeanie, which happened to be quite loud enough for Darwin to hear. “You see how it is, Jeanie Rowland, the great Dr. Darwin goes off to roll his fat in a cosy



bed and leaves others to do his work."

Darwin smiled to himself as he continued into the dining room. He remained only long enough to adjust his scarf and button his greatcoat. Then he headed downstairs for the entrance hall. He left Newlands, and took the dark path that led south along the cliff.

Now came the difficult part.

Darwin walked slowly, chin tucked low on his chest, hardly aware of the rough shingle beneath his feet. His eyes from time to time sought the sea to his right. Somewhere out there would be a ship hove to, its crew perplexed. They would wonder why the signal light had been interrupted. Was it safe to go ashore?

The house rented by Anton Riker was tiny, hardly more than a one room cottage. There was no sign of the pony and trap in front of its only door. True to his word, Riker had gone to Abbotsbury, a few miles farther along the coast. Darwin could guess what that business was. Riker would soon be as confused as the ship's crew.

The cottage door was closed. It was hard to see anything through the single grimy window. A flickering light gleamed from within.

Darwin took a deep breath,

swung the door open, and passed through in a single movement.

The low-ceilinged room was lit by two tallow candles in stone bowls, one at each end of a table of knotty elm. The Riker calculating engine was on the floor by the wall, looking exactly as it had in the Newlands' dining room. A bed stood to the right on one side of the fireplace, and on the other side was a child's cot.

Food was set out on the table: a leg of cold mutton, a great dish of pickled onions, dark bread, and a steaming cauliflower. A quart pewter mug stood by the single plate. Next to that plate sat a man. He had a knife in his hand and was about to slice mutton from the joint.

The man's legs dangled from the tall chair, and the crown of his head was no more than twelve inches above the tabletop.

Darwin nodded to him casually as though meeting a dwarf late at night was the most normal and pleasant thing in the world.

"Good evening. I was hoping to converse with Professor Riker."

To anyone less observant, the other's brief hesitation would have passed unnoticed. "The professor is away on business,"

he said. And, when Darwin did not respond, "I am—his manservant. My name is Elie Marée."

The dwarf spoke good English, though with a definite Normandy accent. He slid down from the chair, moved away from the table, and bowed to Darwin. Standing, he was at most three and a half feet tall. His arms and legs were short and stubby, but the large head was well-formed. Alert brown eyes swept Darwin from head to foot.

Darwin smiled his toothless smile. "I wonder if I might wait here for the professor's return."

Again the pause for thought was scarcely discernible, but Darwin had a sense of rapid evaluation and of a definite choice made.

"Certainly." Marée waved to a seat at the other side of the table. "I am about to dine. If you would care to join me . . ."

"Perhaps a bite or two." Darwin sat down, picked up a pickled onion, and crunched it with pleasure. He wiped vinegar from his lips with his sleeve. The other man put out two plates, carefully carved mutton, and waited.

"I saw the calculating engine demonstrated earlier this evening." Darwin nodded to the machine. "It is a wonderful invention."

"Professor Riker is a man of outstanding talent."

"I would go beyond that." Dar-

win stood up from his chair and walked across to the engine. "This machine displays genius. one might even say it *contains* genius. Do you know the names of Jedediah Buxton or George Parker Bidder?"

"They are new to me."

"They should not be. You have much in common with them. But one thing about this engine puzzles me more than any other."

"Indeed?" Marée's tone was completely neutral, but he had stopped carving. "I am afraid that an explanation must await Professor Riker's return."

"I am not sure of that. You see, Monsieur Marée, my question has nothing to do with the interior workings of the engine. It is something far more mundane."

The other remained silent.

"It is simply this," Darwin continued. "When the engine arrived at Newlands, two servants were needed to carry it to and from the carriage. But when Professor Riker left that house to bring the machine here, he was alone. The professor is not a man of powerful build. I wondered how it was possible for him, single-handed, to unload an engine heavy enough to need the efforts of two strong young men."

"I helped him." Marée was totally still.



"I feel sure that you did. In more ways than one." Darwin took hold of one corner of the calculating engine and lifted. It rose easily from the floor. "You helped to carry it, but more than that: you diminished its weight, from a hundredweight and more to less than half that. By the amount, in fact, of your own weight."

Again Marée's eyes showed that rapid evaluation and decision was going on behind them. The final shrug of his shoulders suggested that he did not care any more. He raised the carving knife but only to spear slices of mutton and drop them onto the two plates.

"How much do you know—*Dr. Darwin*? I think you will agree that it gives away nothing to admit that I realize who you are."

"Nothing at all. One might say, in some sense, we were introduced to each other earlier this evening. Would you do me the honor of showing me the inner working of your invention?—I assume that it is all yours."

"Totally. Design and fabrication. Anton Riker is a brave man and a good actor but nothing more." Elie Marée hopped off his chair and went to crouch by the calculating engine. He pressed a concealed stud in the base, and the lower section slid open across its whole length like a

drawer. "As you see. The levers here, that can be read off below as they are moved above. The type here, to print answers."

"Just so. But the *provision* of those arithmetical answers, monsieur?"

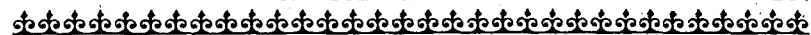
Marée did not speak but tapped his forehead.

Darwin nodded. "As I thought. I did not mention Jedediah Buxton and George Bidder for no reason. They, like you, are phenomenal calculators, capable of feats of mentation far beyond most men. Unlike you, they lack the power of original engineering design." He leaned forward, examining the cavity at the base of the engine. "It is padded but most cramped. Long hours inside must be uncomfortable."

"Believe me, Dr. Darwin, I am used to discomfort. The life of a dwarf is not all pleasure." For the first time, Marée's voice betrayed emotion. He gestured to the engine. "Do you wish to see how I lie inside? It is a tight fit—even for a little man."

"That is not necessary. Come, eat your dinner. You have more than deserved it."

"I am not sure that I have appetite." But Marée closed the drawer and returned to the table. "What now, Dr. Darwin? You know my secret. You can easily expose me and destroy my livelihood. You will surely



not permit our other activities in England to continue. Whatever happens, I have no future."

Rather than answering at once, Darwin reached for a slice of mutton and began to chew on it moodily.

"There are other mysteries," he said at last. "It is not my purpose to cause you pain, but I do not understand why you follow such a life. You have great gifts, that is obvious. You have used them, too, but for deception. And you are here in a foreign land, living with discomfort and uncertainty and danger—for you must know the consequences if your role in assisting a revolt in France were to be discovered. Why not use your powers openly to do what you do so well?"

Despite his stated lack of interest in food, Elie Marée had begun to eat. He was picking at the cauliflower, breaking off pieces with his fingers. "What would be easy for another is not easy for me. May I tell a story, Dr. Darwin?"

"Whatever you wish, sir."

"I am twenty-seven years old. The lifespan of one such as I is not long—perhaps forty years. I do not complain of that. Christ and Alexander had fewer years to accomplish their work. But with the knowledge of short life, I am perhaps too impatient. I have always had a talent for engineering invention. Two years

ago I had what seemed like a most valuable idea. As you know, water power increasingly runs our spinning wheels and looms. But there is a problem in controlling the machinery to operate at a constant speed when the water flow varies.

"I have solved that problem. I place spring-loaded weights on the perimeter of the driven wheel. They move outward under centrifugal force as the spin increases, return inward as it decreases. Their changing position adjusts the water flow, according as the weights are farther from or nearer to the center. In this way we can precisely govern and make constant the speed of the wheel without human intervention. Do you follow?"

"I do completely. It is most ingenious and must be of vast value."

"I thought so. In fact, I was so convinced of its worth that I sought an audience with his majesty King Louis. I was quite prepared to offer my invention without personal reward for the good of France. But I made a fatal mistake. I was sure that king and Court would immediately grasp the significance of what I had done—as you did. The king, after all, has a reputation as a skilled locksmith. I did not think that a large working model would be necessary. Now I real-

ize that I ought to have controlled some giant wheel on the Seine or the Loire river to demonstrate an impressive mastery over nature.

"But I did not. Instead, I took to the Palace of Versailles a small-scale model, without the means to drive it. I cannot describe my excitement as I waited in the antechamber for my audience. I had rehearsed a thousand times what I would say to the king.

"It was all in vain. I was lost as soon as I entered the door of the royal chamber, my model in my arms. A score of people were with the king, men and women both. I heard them titter and giggle and remark to each other as I went forward." Marée's voice became bitter. "To them I was not an inventor, Dr. Darwin, seeking to serve France. I was not even a man. I was a freak, a walking joke, a parody of humanity carrying in his arms a child's toy.

"I began my explanation, stammering and lame-tongued. The king was not listening; he was too distracted by his jesting courtiers. One of the gowned women said, with no attempt to keep the words from my ears, 'How does he propose to drive the little wheel? Piss on it with his teeny-weeny little thing?'

"I stopped. The king waved a hand. I was ushered out. It was

over, the end of my great audience."

Darwin nodded slowly. "Monsieur Marée, I understand the magnitude of your tragedy too well to offer sympathy. So let me instead ask two questions. First, would your 'speed governor' work as well to regulate the flow of steam?"

Marée frowned at the sudden change of subject. "I don't see why not. But I know little about steam power, although here in England it is much talked about."

"It will define the future. My second question: what will you do now?"

"I told you. Nothing. Unlike steam, I have no future."

"That is not an acceptable answer. I can see why you hate bitterly the court of France; I would feel the same. But vengeance can never make a full life. I have a different suggestion if you will hear me out."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No. I speak now both as physician and engineer. For your physical condition I regret to say that I can do nothing. It is congenital. For the rest—" Darwin rummaged in the pocket of his greatcoat and came up with Jacob Pole's letter. "Do you have pen and ink?"

"I will get it."

Darwin smoothed a page and turned to its blank back. "This



part of the country may not be safe for you. You must travel to Birmingham, well north of here. When can you leave?"

"Nothing holds me here. If necessary I can leave at once."

"Good. I am going to give you an introduction to a Mr. James Watt." Darwin took the goose quill, dipped it, and began to write. "He will, at my request, employ you in the Soho works. I propose to point out that your possible contributions are many in number and he should attend most carefully to your ideas on speed governors and anything else."

"Attend—as the court of France attended? Dr. Darwin, I may be in England, but my height is no greater than in Paris. I will be taken no more seriously."

"Not so. You do not know good Jimmy Watt." Darwin was scribbling furiously. "Talk to him of engineering, you could be stark naked and painted indigo and he wouldn't notice. He has said to me many a time, a man is not measured by wealth or stature or family name but by the ideas that lie inside his head. You and he will get along famously—take my word on it. He will teach you *steam*."

He sanded the ink, blew on it, and stood up.

"Come to Newlands early tomorrow morning. You will trav-

el with Colonel Pole. You heard him, no doubt, tonight, but he did not see you and you observed only one aspect of him. You will discover the rest in transit. Let me only say that you may trust him with your life and you should allow him to handle any emergency. As for me, I must divert to London for three days. When I return to Birmingham I look forward to hearing of your progress there."

He took one last look at the calculating engine, then went across to where Elie Marée was standing staring at the letter of introduction. He leaned down and held out his hand. "I say this, sir, in all sincerity. It has been an honor and a privilege to make your acquaintance."

The other man stretched up to his full height as they shook hands. "And to make yours, Dr. Darwin." Elie Marée's eyes were level with Darwin's ample midriff. He raised them to the other man's face and added in a voice of new confidence and optimism, "It is as you say, sir, a man must not be judged by his stature—or his *girth*."

A freezing wind blew in Darwin's face as he walked the edge of the cliff, but he chuckled at Marée's remark. A joke was the best barometer of mental weather. Forget Elie Marée's size. The man was tough. He would sur-



vive, and for him the best years were yet to be. James Watt would welcome him like a brother; between them they would light a torch to set the world ablaze.

And when that happened—Darwin's thoughts grew more somber—Elie Marée would have his revenge. The force of science was stirring in the world, and the old order of courts and emperors could not stand against it. This cold wind of midnight, blowing south into Europe, was for the old regimes. With Ameri-

ca gone, who could say where lightning might strike next?

Darwin opened the front door of Newlands quietly and went light-footed upstairs.

He hesitated on the landing. Should he wake Jacob Pole and tell him what had happened?

No. He proceeded to his own bedroom.

Tonight his thoughts were too dark for any company but his own. Tomorrow would be soon enough for his old friend to make the acquaintance of a great man.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

Santa's workshop at the North Pole was no slipshod seasonal operation—year around, it was a buzzing, highly organized metropolis. Each kind of toy was made by a specialized team of elves under supervision of an elf foreman.

The eight foremen in charge of producing balls, blocks, dolls, dominoes, skates, sleds, wagons, and yo-yos were named Alvie, Boogie, Chollie, Doolie, Eddie, Floogie, Goobie, and Hoopie.

These same elves were each also responsible for caring for one of Santa's reindeer, daily brushing its coat and polishing its hooves.

Each elf wore a distinctive suit—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown, or tan—and a woolen cap from among the same colors, but no elf had a suit and cap of the same color.

(1) The elf who had care of Vixen, the one in the yellow suit, and the one charged with ball production included Alvie, Boogie, and Chollie. None of the three had caps of purple or blue.

(2) The elf who had care of Cupid, the one in the green suit, and the one in the yellow cap, none of whom produced skates, were named (in some order) Floogie, Goobie, and Hoopie. The one caring for Cupid (who didn't produce dominoes) did not have the orange suit. The one in the green suit did not have a brown or purple cap.

(3) Eddie, the elf in the purple suit, and the one producing toy wagons included those taking care of Blitzén, Dasher, and Prancer. Eddie (who did not wear the red suit) was not the elf making yo-yos.

(4) Floogie, the elf in the tan suit, and the one wearing the orange cap included those taking care of Donner, Comet, and Dancer. Floo-

gie (who didn't have the red cap) was neither the one in the blue suit nor the one making dominoes.

(5) Chollie, the elf caring for Prancer, and the one wearing the red cap (none of whom made blocks) included those in the brown, red, and orange suits. Chollie wasn't the elf in the tan cap, and Hoopie wasn't the one caring for Prancer (who was neither the one making balls nor the one wearing the purple cap). The elf caring for Dancer did not wear the purple cap.

(6) Goobie, the elf in the red suit, and the one wearing the brown cap included the three making dolls, sleds, and yo-yos. The elf in the red suit was neither Doolie nor the elf caring for Blitzen.

(7) Alvie, the elf caring for Donner, and the one making dolls included the three wearing green, tan, and blue caps, but not the one in the blue suit (who didn't look after Dasher).

(8) The elf in the tan suit (who is neither the one in the yellow cap nor the one making balls) wasn't Alvie (who didn't take care of Dasher).

The trouble began when one elf foreman read a book titled *How to Become a Millionaire*. It seemed easy. He would borrow Santa's toy designs, set up factories in Third World countries, and build up a monopoly.

No more giving away toys; he'd sell them for as much as the market would bear. He would become the richest person on earth! Mounting his reindeer, the ambitious elf headed south.

Santa Claus learned of the situation when the elves in the skate division reported, "Our foreman is missing. What shall we do?"

For several minutes Santa was not his usual jolly self. Mrs. Claus was shocked by his outburst. Finally he calmed down and appointed another elf foreman in charge of skate production.

Meanwhile, the truant elf stopped in Edmonton to arrange financing for his venture. The banker said, "Your proposal is far too extensive for one bank. See the mayor."

The mayor of Edmonton declared, "A business of this magnitude requires approval of the lieutenant-governor."

So the elf met with the lieutenant-governor of Alberta, who said, "This has national implications. Check with the prime minister."

The elf rode his tired reindeer to Ottawa. The prime minister declared, "International treaties are required for such a far-reaching project. Go to the United Nations."

The United Nations added the elf's proposal to the end of its long agenda, promising to debate its merits in a few years.

But New York is not a place to thrive on expectations. Cold, hungry, and unable to feed his reindeer, the disheartened elf donated it to the Bronx Zoo and took up residence in a shelter for homeless elves, his dreams of riches forever shattered.

If, therefore, your Christmas presents are fewer and lighter in future years, please bear in mind that Santa Claus has to make deliveries with only seven reindeer.

Who was the elf with grandiose plans to become a millionaire?

Which reindeer now resides in the Bronx Zoo?

See page 129 for the solution to the December puzzle.

FICTION

NIGHT WORK

Steve Lindley



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/98

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

“You don’t like it that I call it a hit,” Jimmy says, not even bothering to look at me this time, for which I’m grateful as looking at you isn’t good enough for Jimmy, no. He can’t keep you that loose, but stares a glare, all coiled in a challenge at every second of silence, his eyes and locked-down jowls of flab daring you to do anything but nod and whimper about how right on the money the master’s just been again. “Like it’s not as tricky or dangerous as a snuff, is that what you think?”

Lake Shore Drive ends easy the way it does, sliding us soft on Hollywood into sweet, familiar, city traffic-lit streets, leaving the blacker than dark empty that is the lake at night behind us. And that’s another thing for which I’m grateful because too much nothing makes me nervous, and the invisible water has been riding along on my side of the car like the edge of a cliff since we spun onto the drive at Wacker.

“Come up behind some s.o.b. as he’s unlocking his front door,” Jimmy says. “Blow a bullet into the back of his skull, turn and run. A guy might fool himself into thinking he’s tough if he can do that.” Jimmy skips past Sheridan and pushes through to Broadway. I don’t know why. Maybe he just likes Broadway.

“What’s tough is walking into that s.o.b.’s kitchen and talking to him face to face all the time you’re making up your mind which bones of his you’re going to concentrate on.”

In front of us a cabbie shows his brake lights in a too quick double-park stop. Jimmy swings around him smooth, all big boat power steering, the heel of his hand on the wheel all it takes. The heater’s blowing the kind of heat that makes you sleepy. Jimmy doesn’t play the radio.

“And you never turn and run,” he says. “You stay after you’re finished long enough to whisper real fear in his ear and make sure tomorrow he’ll be on the street putting your work into words. That is a hit. Am I wrong?”

I never said he was and didn’t mind that he argued the point with himself, but now he’s looking at me, wearing that Jimmy victory grin, waiting for me to either press my fist into it or look away, my choice. Tough on tough, that’s the Jimmy he thinks he is, or thinks he has to be, this hard into the tail end of his forties, post-prime Lucky Strike wheezer with breath like raw meat and a face full of little balloons where the dark liquor’s settled. Tough on tough, he’s made his stand, and choice chosen, I’m looking out the window thinking tough is listening to

him chuckle when I know my first shot would shock the master enough to afford me another, and that would be all it would take. That would be a hit.

We aren't on Broadway long, Jimmy jogging over to Glenwood before he has to, trading the fast-flow traffic for stop-sign creep, holiday-lit storefronts for dark doorways. We're as deep as we're going to get into real northside neighborhood, and Jimmy's taking his time, getting the feel of it. That's fine for Jimmy, him being more comfortable with the night, or maybe the night with him. But me, being one of the dusk scamperers since my second shot at the open doors, learning late that the setting sun wakes only cops and crazies and that a smile in daylight might give you a pass but a grin bright in the light of the moon makes strangers even stranger, me, I would have preferred a Sheridan run.

Then, short of Devon, we're there, the address sixty watts dim, etched on the old beveled glass door, a once-upon-a-time oh so grand entrance to the three story brick and stone.

"Abandoned castles," Jimmy says with a cigarette wave at the line of bay-windowed buildings. "Built up one brick at a time back when Chicago was the hub of America. Now look at them. Left naked to the peas-

ants. You give up more than just your nobility when you run scared."

No grin this time, so I figure he's talking to himself again. He finds curb space on the corner, a tight pass for legal but a straight shot out in case of trouble. A button under the dash pops the trunk open soft, and with the engine, heater, and lights cut, we might as well not have the glass between us and the street, so we're out of the car with no excuse to stall. Jimmy pulls the Louisville Slugger from the trunk while I look up and down the block, the empty sidewalks straight and skinny between rust-nibbled cars parked snug and apartment windows glowing yellow, everything Thanksgiving night silent. Here and there some Christmas lights are already up, big bulbs mostly, framing windows square and stark.

The front door won't work for us, no. This is a back door visit, and we walk around the corner to the alley entrance, moving from dark to darker, padding the path of the neighborhood cats and rats. You can see the castle-rot back here where there's more wood than stone and windows don't fit and back porches sag, and I'm cold already and wouldn't mind spinning around and trotting off on a tavern hunt to prime our-

selves silly for the task ahead, but Jimmy chugs on, his heavy furnace of a body quick turning at the second set of steps, which tells me he's been here before, Mister Homework. And I follow, which is what I'm being paid to do, after all, watch his back, though three steps below him all the way up it's something just as broad but even less appealing I'm looking at.

Top floor and Jimmy leans bent to rest, his hands on his knees and his breaths shooting steam. In the back door window, a kitchen light shines through curtains colored by the stove. Jimmy's breathing finally steadied, he straightens and gives three raps with the Kentucky door knocker. Three more and a shadow moves inside. The curtains open on the face of a woman who enjoys her own greasy stews too much. Nobody smiles. The curtains drop, and the shadow slips away. A minute later another comes up, and there's a stocky, stubble-chin, whitehair workingman staring out at us. Henry Olexic I've been told is his name, and he doesn't want to open the door, but he can't let us know that, so open it he does, and Jimmy and I are in his warm, tile-bright kitchen with the door locked behind us and twenty minutes of cold work ahead.

Me, I'm thinking our business

will be conducted here, where the day's roast turkey smells still stick and the dirty dishes sit stacked and soaking and the rest of the family can stay huddled at the other end of the apartment and pretend not to hear papa's screams. But no, Henry Olexic leads us down the hallway, him doing all the talking, though that will change, Jimmy nodding and smiling so you just might not notice the fat end of the baseball bat tapping the heel of his shoe as the three of us, close, short step shoulder-bump down, down to the front room which is all high ceiling and rug space and a thousand coats of cheap paint and too little furniture either sagged or wobbly, except for one piece that's making all the noise and half the light. You can't help but stop and stare at it and not stop staring at it, and for a good minute or two that's what we're all doing.

I've seen televisions like it but only in the department stores where everything's bigger and crisper than real and there are other versions of itself arranged crazy around it, all flashing the same picture to make you dizzy. This one, Henry Olexic's television, has no competition. The screen's so big that when you get too close you're in a Disney-world tube, and when you stand back, you still don't notice that there's a wall behind the screen.

It's not projection, either, that three-color sloppy blur, but is sharp and thick-standing all by itself, and it's showing me a commercial I figure from the way the picture cuts and jumps and swings and the music cranks crashing around the voice of a pretty woman who knows what she's talking about. Then there's a shadow blocking the light, and I focus on Jimmy, his body half the size of the pretty woman's face, and if it were my TV I'd tell him to move out of the way, but it isn't, and I don't, and nobody else does, either.

"It's nice," Jimmy says loud, but barely louder than the TV's noise. "Henry, I like it." And now the white crewsock audience is all Jimmy's, three of them, Henry Olexic standing in his holiday finery of T-shirt and painter's pants, the lady from the kitchen window all wrapped up into herself on the couch, sitting mother hen close to a thick, crewcut kid floating around the age where the only things he dreams about are his first driver's license and the girls in his school's hallways.

All eyes on Jimmy, you'd think I wasn't there, and the master of ceremonies points his taped-grip wand at me, and I know what he wants me to do, so I turn back to that long hallway with all its dark doors, and I head down to light them one

by one to be sure there will be no surprise interruptions.

Bedroom and bathroom and bedroom again, I light them all and empty is each, the whole apartment now fuse-blowing bright. I'm just easing up, the kitchen before me and the noise of the front room far behind, when my palm sweat kicks in.

There's one door left, so deep tucked into the corner of the dining room I nearly skipped it, my brain going sleepy for just the second it took to register closet. But a door it is, and I remember the layouts of these old apartments with their servants' bedrooms off the kitchen pantries. And this bedroom is letting me know it has a guest because there's a skinny sound coming from it and a gray light doing a dance in the crack under the door.

The soles of my feet carry me quiet along the wall, and I nerve-gather quick while my hand does its own work turning the doorknob silent and smooth until the tips of my fingers feel the latch click free. Then, no more thinking, it's time for me to move before whoever's inside moves first.

I kick the door into a fast swing and ride into the room with it, working a wide scan that stops on a short brown guy whose bones define his flesh too sharp. He's looking at me by the

time I'm looking at him, but while the heels of my boots are planted firm, his are propped loose on the table in front of him where a tiny TV is spilling its black and white on his face, and a tiny crowd inside the box cheers as he smiles at me because we've both already recognized each other.

"Pete," he says, Angel Diaz being his name, and the last time I said it out loud was when we did the goodbye and good luck hand slap as the exit gates of Dwight Correctional opened for me alone. "Leave it to you to show up at the two minute warning."

Cheeks chipmunk fat with popcorn, Angel turns back to the TV where the shiny helmets are scrimmaging around the fifty. "Detroit's down by six," he tells me. "And they just gave up the ball, but it's in the book they win so this ought to be good."

Now, as many Sunday afternoons as Angel and myself might have spent deep in Dwight counting downs and cursing refs' whistles, tonight it is not the football game nor the empty couch space beside him interesting me, it's what he's doing in Henry Olexic's third bedroom, and I ask him as much.

He waits until Green Bay carries the ball to a clean tackle on Detroit's thirty-eight before letting me know what I've already guessed. "I'm not here for the

party in the living room," he says. "And the turkey at the shelter comes better. The question is what you're doing playing backup for Jimmy the slugger when the last time you shook my hand you told me the fun was over."

I don't answer right away, figuring an explanation is something I owe no one, even Angel. But as no one other than Angel would have even thought to ask for one, I relax into a shrug and tell him that the fun is over and it's not really Jimmy I'm working for but Tommy Rogan, me collecting a straight eleven fifty an hour vanning appliance deliveries out of Tommy's warehouse.

"Tommy Rogan," Angel says. "Son of Joe Rogan."

I tell him that's right, and when Papa Joe, who lends the type of money the types like Henry Olexic don't return, offers me a ride in his limo and flashes a hundred dollar bonus for a two hour favor, the word no does not come up.

"Brandy and eggnog money," Angel says, shaking his head at me or at Detroit, I don't know. "Joe in his limo, Jimmy in his Buick boat, and you're still riding on a roll of tokens. It always going to be that way, Pete?"

This new Angel talk I don't like, remembering him as not a judge and clucker, no, but easy

and cool as the way he's sitting with his butt low and boots high. I ask him how he's so sure I'm on the hike and ride, and he only smiles around a pop sip. I ask him how much he's pulling from Henry Olexic to watch football in his bedroom, and for that matter, what is Angel Diaz, who six months ago I left in Dwight two years short of work release, doing wandering through the open doors, when he puts up his hand because the TV is making noise again as Green Bay loses the ball on a quarterback sack and Detroit's defense picks up the fumble.

"You see the way it goes," he says as the stadium squatters boo the team he told me was booked to win. "The fans think those boys on the field are working for them, but if they were, they'd fix it so the home team would always win, wouldn't they?"

Angel rolls up the bottom of his T-shirt fold by fold over his flat belly and higher still until it rises above a skinny, three inch long, crooked lump of white scar between two ribs.

"Me," he says, fingering the vanilla bumps, "I'm what they call an expert at backing losers. I didn't know that back in Dwight, and the first hint I got otherwise was when Frankie Pacamo caught me blind with my head full of shampoo. There

was no real reason for it, the two of us having racked up too many losses to show a good season, but if there were a winner, I'd guess it was me because he's still in Dwight and here I am."

Angel smooths down his shirt, letting my questions hang, and hang they do, him checking his watch with a workingman's end-of-break sigh. "You're not carrying?" he asks, and I tell him I wouldn't be, not with the State of Illinois's hook still in my cheek. "Good," he says, punching a button on the TV. And as both teams are sucked into one hot, fast-fading dot in the screen's center, he's off the couch, offering me first shot at the doorway. "We're not going to settle this thing in here."

While Angel moves down the hall all casual cool-breeze loose, his cola in one hand and the bowl of popcorn in the other, I'm winding into a cold finger chest wrap around what he's last said. I've never worked against Angel, no, nor him against me, and it seems wrong we should find ourselves facing off against each other on our first meet outside. I'm wondering why this doesn't bother him as it does myself when we're back in the front room where I'm facing one more worry.

Jimmy's glare my way is too hard to be pure nerve cover. My time-taking at the apartment's

other end was a mistake he will punish me with later. I offer a nod to dry his sweat and lag a step behind Angel, who, I figure, is to be ushered into the Olexic gallery, but Big Jimmy only turns back to his audience, leaving Angel free to cross behind him to a seat by the bay windows.

Angel drops floppy into a plastic chair, resting his popcorn on the radiator where the butter will stay warm. Me, I stay standing, trying to make sense of why Jimmy's forced me into a straddle. Maybe he's gambling he can handle the three Olexics himself, but with me on back watch it's my chips he's wagering, and I'm beginning to feel as nervous as Henry Olexic looks.

"Late is late," Jimmy says loud enough for the back row to hear crisp. He's started into his strut, and I guess all I've missed are Henry's excuses. "It's past six and the drive-up window's closed. It happens. You ever pull up to the bank just as the teller's drawing the shades, Henry?"

"Yes," Olexic says. "Yes."

"I'll bet you have."

The TV lets out a laugh, a family hour sitcom full of clean, sweated boys and girls running in and out of fancy apartment doors. The volume's up higher than it was when I left,

Jimmy's work, an Olexic howl cover.

"I have some cash," Olexic says, his accent thick as his eyebrows.

"Here?"

"Of course. Right here. Tonight."

Beside me Angel chuckles. "Poor Henry," he says. "Feeding Jimmy all the easy lines. He'll only bring that bat down on his knees quicker."

I tell Angel that in that case he might not want to rest back so slack, but Angel only crosses his ankles.

Mister October is thumbnailing the past performance nicks on his slugger. "I'm not authorized to collect cash, Henry. The bank doesn't make house calls."

The lady barks now from the couch, her speak aimed only at hubby in a private language checked with *sh*'s and *k*'s. Henry Olexic listens and doesn't have to mull over what she says but turns back to Jimmy fast.

"Yes," he says. "Extra for you."

"Extra for me?" And for a minute there's nothing but happy TV blabber until Jimmy slow turns to show me private a look just short of a wink. "Extra. For me?"

I wonder what Angel thinks he's doing to earn whatever Henry Olexic is paying him because he might want to put his

hand over the man's mouth, and I tell him so. Angel shows his palms.

"It's his mouth," he tells me. "I'll do what I can for Henry, but there's only so much grace you can bestow on a man when he's on the receiving end of his own stupidity."

Angel points at the TV. "You see where Henry dropped his loan," he says. "Even discounted because of the scratches where was once its identification number, the item is too extravagant for the Olexic holiday cash trickle. Some Christmas wishes are best left wishes, Pete. Watch out."

I turn in time to catch the bottom part of Jimmy's swing swish low and land smart on that bit of bony shin so tender and thin four inches below Henry's knee. Lucky Henry's stance was loose-footed, so the leg kicks up rather than shatters, and the body above it does a quick spin around and down to the floor.

The two couch bodies come forward like passengers in a head-on, then stop there, waiting for head of household to reveal to them his wound depth, hoping the lesson is over and not wanting to spur another. Henry is doing a low clutch and moan, staying polite and hoping the same.

Me, I'm still hearing that sick-

sounding bat crack, both my shins smarting and a swallow not quite working its way down my throat. On the TV another door slams, and the noise makes my shoulders jump.

"First time you've seen Jimmy work?" I hear Angel say behind me. "It's uglier than he makes it sound, but you have to give him credit, he doesn't enjoy the actual job the way he does the telling of it."

Jimmy, patient, lights a Lucky, pop-coughs smoke around it. He watches the TV for a bit, giving Olexic time to reopen his ears.

Finally, "Extra for me," he says again with a sad, slow head shake. "Henry, your cash on hand belongs to Joe Rogan. If whatever you have stashed in your cupboard had been delivered to him along with the pieces of a broken piggy bank, your Thanksgiving night might be going on the way it began."

This I know for true, Papa Joe being the type to accept a short payment if that's all there is to take. But Henry Olexic's choice chosen, he has made for his family a holiday that does not belong in any photo album. As for my own, I now know too late it is as ready to be erased as the few I've suffered buried in Dwight's concrete walls, and the paper soon to be tucked into my pocket seems lean payment

for my having to stand sweating for Henry as we both wait on Jimmy's next move.

Waiting, my mind' moving quicker than the slow, head-clock seconds ticking between swings, I'm thinking thoughts of finding my earliest exit from this hot, thick to my ears, Olexic home and out to the freedom of the cool street. I'm pondering the sum of Henry's hidden cash stash and seeing myself and Jimmy downtown later tonight passing a grasp of crumpled bills, a handshaking compromise of holiday benevolence with Papa Joe Rogan giving forgiving thanks for the small bounty returned to him, all faces all smiles, winners all, even Henry with a bare cupboard and a smarting shin. This sudden idea filters so pure and free of argue points it sends me forward a step with my mouth open to pass it to Jimmy, when I feel Angel's grip on my arm.

"You don't want to do that," he tells me flat, the casual breeze that was his air gone. And as much as I might dislike being stopped stiff by his tight hold on my sleeve, Angel's first move in Henry Olexic's defense is at least one I have been expecting. Rules and roles no longer crossed, I'm loose again, and since Angel can't know I'm fast planning pax with a blue helmet halo on my head, I ask him just

what he thinks I'm about to do, anyway.

Angel releases my arm so he can fold his hands under his chin, not a familiar Angel pose at all. "It's Jimmy who's up front here," he says. "In case you haven't noticed, the two of us are invisible as banquet waiters, and that's how it should be. You step between him and Henry, it doesn't matter what you say, you're not the one supposed to be saying it. Jimmy would have to teach you a lesson, and he'd use Henry's knees to do it."

I look at Jimmy's face, and the happy holiday handshakes of my imagination disappear. Mrs. Olexic is now speaking to Jimmy direct, telling long tales of work promised to her husband, promises broken by deceit or bad weather. Angel is right. Excuse and reason are being heard by Jimmy, but his script is old and set. The missus can provide only pauses, and any lines by me can bring only worse.

"You see the bind you're in," Angel says to me. "If your presence is needed in any way, the result will be that Henry O. will never walk again. So, you must hope you're not needed, which leaves you free to sit back and enjoy a bonecracking only you and, at a time too far behind him, Henry could have prevented. He's left to set splints, while you face the boast over tonight's

work on the long, warm ride home. Your call, Pete. Now you understand why I can afford to sit back and wait."

But wait Angel didn't with that tug on my elbow, and I tell him so, then ask him how his options smell any sweeter than mine. A jump on Jimmy, squelched by me, could only add to the number of blows on Henry's legs, and even if Angel did manage to send me and Jimmy limping head-tucked home, a nine A.M. resumption of business meeting at Rogan headquarters would take up the report of his enforcer's failure, leaving Henry's fate the same.

"Only," Angel says, "if that enforcer were to report his failure, an act which would leave him not only embarrassed, but likely jobless, with nowhere to take his cocky swagger but from barstool to S.R.O. The one way for us to walk clean of the ugliness planned here is to take advantage of the fact Jimmy is not capable of putting his foul-ups into words."

It is now I understand the reason behind Angel's ease, him thinking I might give up Jimmy at the sight and sound of wood on bone. But I tell him, as Jimmy told me, that tomorrow, on the street, it will be the bruises and crutches that tell the tale of tonight's work, and any words to Papa Joe through Jimmy's lying

lips puffed and blue would carry thinner than Henry's excuses here.

Then, as I'm dropping the persuade and inform on Angel, I see his eyes focus behind me where Jimmy's attention is back on the floor-sitting Henry. Jimmy is pushing the coo and coax, telling Henry the shin smack couldn't have hurt so, and he would like to continue the discussion at eye level but has no intention of squatting down himself. This he says as he drops his cigarette on the floor in front of Henry and crushes it with the thin flat of his Florsheim.

My palm sweat returns, all in the room knowing the discussion ends with the straightening of Henry's knees. Still, Angel pours words into my one ear aimed his way.

"I wouldn't expect you to defect from Jimmy," he says. "You owe Henry no favors and have made good promise on a job effort. Cross Jimmy, and you're crossing Joe Rogan, which ensures your bones the same breaks as Henry's. Besides, you're all Jimmy's got between him and the cold tonight, which is more than he has on most. To cut him loose would be as sad an act as the one we're about to witness."

I slow turn back to Angel if just to check for joke in his eyes,

his sudden concern for Jimmy more confusing than anything he's said previous. He trades his quiet serious for a grin.

"I told you I'm an expert at backing losers," he says. "Look at him, Pete. Coming up on fifty years with no one behind him and nothing in his future but a lead parachute. He brags about the danger of his type of hit, but if you ask him to count on his fingers the number of men he's killed, he'll wave at you a clenched fist. He's just an honest man doing dishonest work for earnest money, his boast and bluster the last wind of a life full of busted ladder rungs. If he weren't here tonight, he'd be spending his Thanksgiving at home, alone and still not understanding why, with a TV dinner in his lap and his shades drawn to shut out the warm holiday dinners of families to which he doesn't belong. Tomorrow his only reward will be the passing of a fat, unmarked envelope from a hand that will be washed with scented soap after touching his.

"But tonight he has you. Tonight he is a teacher, a performer, and you're his pupil and his real audience. He is the master, Mister October, and if that were to be taken away from him, he truly would be left with nothing. It may be yet. There is a boy on that couch with the

strength to take Jimmy down and little understanding of his father's folly. If you are to keep your watch concentrated on anyone, it should be him."

I hear the master's voice now, and I turn from Angel to see Henry Olexic rising on newborn-calf legs. On the TV behind Jimmy one of the pleasant, clean faces has filled the screen with himself. He wears a soft, white, home comfort sweater with a pattern of baby red hearts, and he might as well be speaking to the back of Jimmy's neck while a chorus of unseen in the room with us laugh at what he's saying.

But me, on Angel's advice, I'm now eyeing the boy on the couch sitting side-cramped beside his mother, this heavyweight who could be Henry or Jimmy in thirty years, the call yet to come. In this year of his he may be spending his days using his bulk to muscle schoolmates or flex for girls, or maybe only wrap it around himself in a shy slink from ridicule. I have no way to know, so I watch.

"I'm sorry, Henry," the slugger speaks sadly, the business end of his bat doing a light and steady palm slap into his left hand. "Because this isn't between us. So when you lick your wounds, I don't want you to think of me but of your responsi-

bility to make good on payments promised."

And with that message left to hang in the white burn of companionless pain, Mister October flows liquid into a two-hand grip, shoulder-back swing setup that rocks low, around and down to drive a major league crack. But the swing is early, Henry's wobble keeping him loose, and his escape from the blow to come sends him into a backward fall with nothing to grip but a lamp that goes down with him and shatters, taking the room's light with it.

Under hallway glow and TV screen shimmer, our shapes all frozen can still be seen by each, but until our eyes adjust, the night has found its way in through the windows. I stand tensed, waiting for a signal, knowing that bodies in the dark move in ways they wouldn't under light. I'm concentrating on the youngest Olexic when the mother screeches a shriek I first think might be the sound of my nerves in the black. It is not, but a scream sounded to carry her up off the couch and into a vault onto Jimmy's back where she hangs her weight on his shoulders and plants a pit bull jawlock on Jimmy's right ear. The next screech is his.

Moving, I save a bit of breath for a curse on Angel who, I think, has pointed me false. But

mistake made, while young Olexic may sit frightened and dazed watching the results of papa's blunder, he cannot ignore that big, aching heartball that is a boy's love for his mother, and just as I'm slowing my approach seeing Jimmy shrug off mama, who goes down hard, the boy is off the couch in youth speed. He reaches Jimmy before I do, and a forearm check to Jimmy's head sends them both sharp sideways out of my path.

To my right Henry is making a gaping-faced shuffle on his elbows toward his wife, she on hands and knees offering her sobs, along with drops of Jimmy's blood, to the floor. To my left the two heavyweights are one mass of slap and claw rolling from back to side, their feet a shuffling search for anything solid. I stand short of decision while what has slipped from the slugger's grip rolls to a bump-stop against my toe. I bend and come up with the bat, my next choice being on whom it must land first.

The old Olexic couple gropes together, the wife helping her husband to his feet, and he takes one butter-limbed step forward to aid his son. Jimmy and the boy, locked in their scramble, are offering the backs of their heads whole to crack under my blow. My call. Quick,

I look for Angel whose words I'm now waiting for to guide or check my next action, but he is gone, gone like he was never there visible or invisible, and my search ends on the only face in the room that is looking at me. It is the young, flawless man bright on the screen, his hands in his pockets and his head cocked to one side, a smirk on his face because he's just said something else the crowd behind him finds funny as he looks past me into Henry Olexic's living room, a guest invited to a party he can't and will never see, invited at a price too high for Henry Olexic, the payment about to be taken from his son. It is a scene I might find just as funny if I were a stranger pressing my nose against the window, but as the clean sweater man takes his hands from his pockets and rests them on his hips, readying another laugh prompt, I know I have no place in his audience, its soft, red velvet seats reserved for the types who view distant such low boys' scrabbles and might make mindless bet on the Olexic spread. No, it is Pete now the source of his amusement, me, standing dumb, the show. So before he can open his mouth to further amuse, I take the stance of my tutor and carry forward a swing meant to press through the pattern of tiny hearts on his chest.

I'm expecting a smash of glass, being of the old school of televisions with tubes, but this monster is made flat of plastic, and my bat bounces back with a ripple of pain moving from my wrists to elbows. The young man and the crowd behind him enjoy this latest act of folly too much for me to take, so choice chosen, I gear back strong for a second hit, and this time it is a hit, pushing through the screen and into the guts of that which has brought his flesh into the room with me. A hit, another, and a hit again, the blows bring to an end the career of Jimmy's proud Louisville Slugger, it cracking in two, dying together with the room's light and noise.

A full minute we all spend still in the dark quiet, listening to the radiator's soft hiss and clang, even Jimmy and the boy now lying separated from their push and shove. Jimmy is the first to move, raising his weight up to rest on the soles of his Florsheims, his once-starched shirttails hanging sloppy and a wide-eyed wheeze pressing sweat stains into his armpits. He pulls a handkerchief from his breast pocket and holds it to his nibbled ear while his eyes do a quick floor search for a bit of wood in two pieces not worth picking up. The Olexics have forgotten his existence, their

stares set on a sheet of black plastic with a hole in its middle, their faces showing the loss of a friend though they have never been touched by that boy in the sweater nor he by them.

Me and Jimmy standing unseen, he palms flat his hair and tilts his head, a sweet, clear signal aimed at me, and I follow him down the hall, through the kitchen, and away from the home of Henry Olexic's family. Outside it must be cold as ever, but the air spreads my lungs and dries my own sweat, and the three flights down the crooked staircase pound easy. Jimmy says nothing until we are in the car, the doors slammed closed. And he doesn't start the car, no, but fishes for a Lucky and lights it with a Zippo I'm not supposed to notice is trembling more than its flame.

"An old trick," he says, not looking at me but at his exhaled smoke rolling off the windshield in front of him. "I used to know a fellow in the auto trade who preferred it over the standard repo, but only because he had a mean streak and a liking for the feel of glass and metal under a sledge hammer."

Now Jimmy does look straight at me, and there's a trace of the old Jimmy victory grin ready to fight its way back onto his face.

"Sure, it's effective up to a

point," he says. "Henry will feel a bit of pain each time he sits down to make a payment on something that will be landing in a dumpster tomorrow morning, but what's that compared to the shudder he'd be feeling in his knees every time his wife or kid picked up that TV's remote? And that's just one of the reasons I prefer to steer clear of that method. You might want to hear the rest in case you ever decide to act again before I have a chance to complete the work I've set out to do."

Rules and roles solid once again, Jimmy brings his boat alive and tells me I look like I could use a drink and he's buying, a bit of extra payment from an envelope yet to be collected for a job he'll never thank me for in words. I'd prefer to drop a token on a quick ride back to my private box of warm and bright, as the drink will turn into a series with me offering a sleepy nod by nod under a Jimmy lecture he needs to give more than I need to hear. But I sit back, the passenger, as we move forward toward the lights of Devon's traffic. And for a minute I feel a crazy bit of envy of Angel, whose night's work is over, whose release from Dwight was, unlike mine, unconditional because of a blade that, I now realize, did slice its mark, though I'm still not sure

whose back he was watching, so casual planted invisible between me and the cold dark of Henry Olexic's, his son's, or maybe even Jimmy's, as he sat the bay windows.

SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Elmo North fatally stabbed Elsie Rollins.

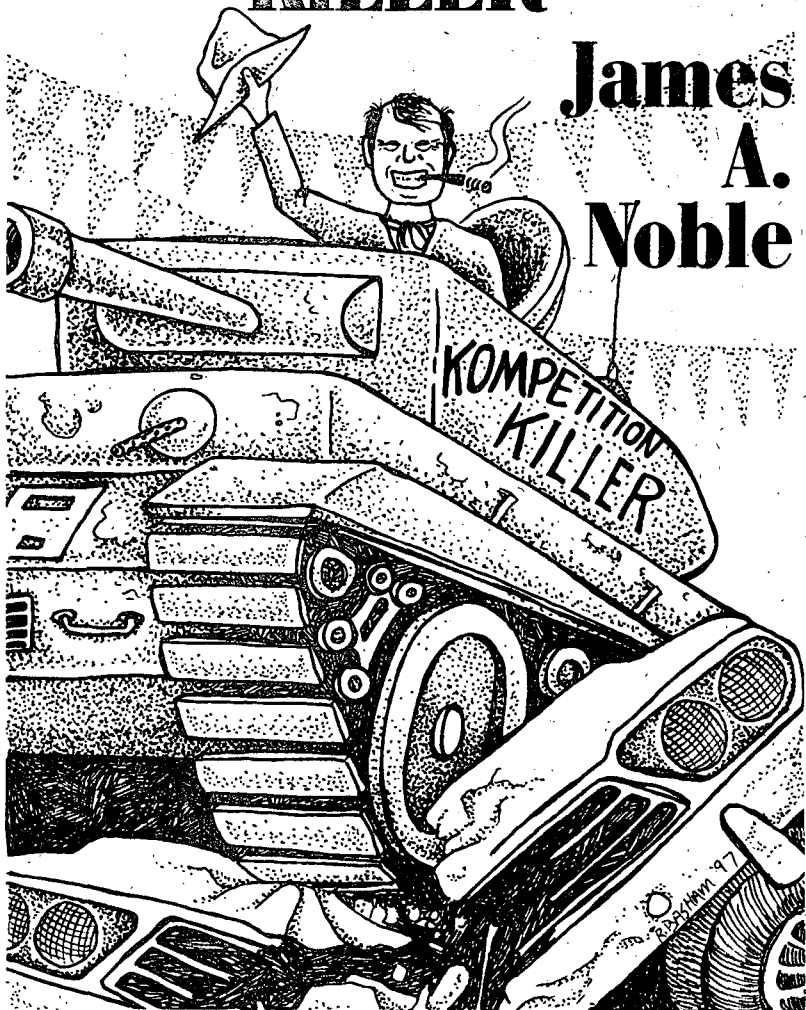
HUSBAND	WIFE	DRESS	HOMETOWN	PROFESSION
Andy Olson	Delia	white	Queens	engineer
Bill McDuff	Alice	blue	Omaha	contractor
Carl Perkins	Flora	green	Rochester	architect
Dave Quigley	Becky	orange	Miami	florist
Elmo North	Cathy	yellow	Peoria	bartender
Fred Rollins	Elsie	red	Newport	dentist

Cathy North later admitted to being the anonymous "poet"; she thought a poem would attract more attention than a plain note. She had had a violent argument with her husband about his renewed affair with Mrs. Rollins, an old flame easily rekindled who threatened to "tell all."

FICTION

THE KOMPETITION KILLER

James
A.
Noble



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG

Illustration by Ray Basham

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/98

No one in my family has ever amounted to much, yours truly included. No one, that is, except for Uncle Fred. Knowing the way he used to be, I never figured him to become a success story. I guess it was that success that eventually forced me to kill his wife Millie, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Fred had a small used car dealership just south of San Francisco. I bet you could never guess the name of the place . . . right, Fred's Used Cars. Real original, huh? He never had more than twenty or twenty-five cars on the lot, but they were all in perfect running condition. I ought to know, I was Uncle Fred's chief mechanic. Well, actually I was Fred's only mechanic.

Uncle Fred was a widower, and I was his closest living relative. He used to put his arm around my shoulder and tell me how his dippy little dealership would all be mine someday. I can't believe I used to really hate it when he did that. At the time I was actually grateful when he married Millie and stopped all the inheritance talk. It became pretty obvious who would be getting the business after that.

Aside from me, there was Buster, Fred's one salesman. I have to admit Buster was pretty good. He had to be. He worked

strictly on a low commission. I didn't get paid much either. You see, Fred was a tightwad.

At that time our motto was "We'll take anything in trade," and boy, did we get some real beauts. Every once in a while, though, someone would come in with a classic, like that '56 Ford Crown Victoria or that old two door Chevy Nomad, and my mouth would start to water. At the same time Uncle Fred and Buster knew I wanted to restore classic cars more than anything, and they would wheel and deal and snatch up some real gems for a song. I suppose the chance of working on a classic was one of the reasons I stayed with Uncle Fred in spite of the pay. That and the fact I couldn't seem to hold a steady job anywhere else.

Fred rarely did any advertising except for a few spots on the local radio station. He just didn't have the style or charisma to be a celebrity car dealer like a lot of the other dealerships in the bay area. All that changed the day this young girl came to the lot with a rented eighteen wheeler and a driver.

Sitting on the back of a huge flatbed trailer was a genuine U.S. Army World War II tank. It wasn't very big as tanks go, and it was in pretty bad shape. I had come out of the garage area and was staring at it like everybody else when this girl jumps down

from the passenger side of the truck cab and announces she wants to trade it in, the tank I mean.

Well, Buster and I looked over at Fred, expecting him to tell this young woman to take her business elsewhere. Instead Fred appeared to be on another planet. He just stood there transfixed. Then he walked slowly toward the flatbed, his jaw hanging open and his hand extended toward the tank. Buster and I turned and looked at each other. We could tell something was brewing in Uncle Fred's mind.

The girl just kind of stood there with her thumbs hooked in the belt of her jeans, waiting for a response. She didn't seem to be in any hurry, so she must have expected there would be a pause for reflection concerning the whole deal.

When Uncle Fred finally got his head out of the clouds and became aware of our presence, he walked over to Buster and me and threw an arm over each of our shoulders and moved us out of hearing range of the girl. He told us he had an idea. Not just any idea but a great idea.

I was astonished, since I had never known Fred to have an idea, let alone a great one. It was obvious we were going to have to get that tank for Uncle Fred for some reason.

I asked the girl if it ran. She just grinned, jumped up onto the flatbed like only someone that young could do, released some chains, and climbed up the side of the tank to the turret. She opened the hatch and disappeared inside. Half a minute later the diesel engine coughed to life, spewing an initial puff of black smoke into the air from each of the two exhaust ports on its back. An instant later she threw it into reverse and drove it straight off the back of the flatbed onto the lot without even using loading ramps.

Turned out the tank had belonged to her recently deceased father. He had been a colonel in the army during the Second World War, bought the surplus tank after he retired, and kept it in a barn on his farm.

After he passed away, his daughter decided to get rid of it. She remembered our "trade anything" motto from a radio ad she had heard, and, well, here she was.

Fred, Buster, and the girl went in the office to negotiate while I stayed outside to look the tank over for any obvious mechanical flaws. She must have driven a hard bargain, but Uncle Fred was not to be denied. In the end I found out he had traded a creampuff '56 Ford I'd busted my butt on to recon-

dition for the tank and two hundred dollars cash. I could've killed him right then and there. I didn't know what Uncle Fred's idea was, but for a trade like that, I figured it had better be good. It was.

Things started happening two days later when Fred showed up late for work for the first time since I'd known him. He was barely recognizable. He was wearing a bright orange polyester suit with a shiny gold vest. The tie was obscene. He had snakeskin boots on his feet and a big white Stetson on his head. Clenched between his pearly whites was the biggest, blackest cigar I had ever seen. Buster and I agreed. Uncle Fred had finally shortcircuited.

The first thing he told me to do was to put the tank in top running condition and have it cleaned and painted. Purple. That's right, purple.

Next, he told me to hire an artist to put his new name for the tank on its side. The name would be the "Kompetition Killer."

After that I was to remove the engine and all the useful parts from an old sedan we had gotten a few days earlier on a trade-in.

Finally he rolled out on Buster's desk a sketch for a new sign for the lot and instructed him to have it made up and installed out front as quickly as

possible. When I saw the new motto on the sign, I had a pretty good idea of what was coming. It said, "We Squash the Kompetition."

Three days after that, the tank was ready and the sign had arrived and was installed. Shortly thereafter a film crew arrived on the lot. Uncle Fred was about to become a genuine West Coast car dealership with a crazy ad and everything. While the film crew was setting up, I was instructed to tow the stripped sedan into a clear area at the front of the lot. When I got it there, I saw Fred all dressed up in his wild outfit standing in front of the idling, purple Kompetition Killer. It was a sight to behold.

When I got the car positioned to his satisfaction, he placed a big sign on the windshield that said "HIGH PRICES." Then he lit the cigar, climbed up to the tank turret, and yelled, "Let's do it!" I was watching a whole new Uncle Fred.

He disappeared into the tank, closing the hatch behind him, and the film director shouted for "Action!" over his megaphone. The cameras were rolling. As the tank picked up speed and headed for the doomed car, the director pointed his megaphone at the crowd of onlookers and yelled, "Fred squashes the competition!" Suddenly the crowd

was cheering and screaming wildly as the tank rolled up the back of the car and totally flattened it.

An instant later as the tank sat atop the remains of its first victim, Uncle Fred popped open the hatch on the turret, and the camera zoomed in for a closeup. He yanked his big white cowboy hat from his head and, with the big cigar clenched between his teeth, said with a menacing sneer, "Who's next?"

The ad aired two weeks later after the film studio did some editing and added a professional announcer. I was really impressed with the results when I first saw it on the tube. The only part I hated was the special effects sound that was added at the point where the tank squashed the car. It was a sort of crunching, cracking sound like someone breaking up a cheap plastic cup. I would have nightmares about it later after Uncle Fred died and I was forced to kill Aunt Millie.

The ad was a really big hit. The next thing we knew, the lot was packed with customers. We were selling used cars so fast we were actually down to two old junkers at one point. That's when Uncle Fred took out a loan and bought the new car dealership just down the road from us. For me it was the beginning of the end.

I liked to work on the old cars. They made sense. You could figure them out. All those new cars have computer chips in them and require special equipment just to keep them running and maintained. I was a dinosaur. Uncle Fred began to promote the young mechanics who were working at the new car dealership and pay them more money than I was making. As he sold more and more new cars, his interest in the used car business waned. The only time he ever called me was when he was planning a new commercial and needed another used car for the *Kompetition Killer*.

I'll never forget the day he told me he was going to do a car-crushing on live television. He wanted something spectacular, so he directed me to get the '56 T-bird ready. I was shocked. I had worked for a year and had nearly finished restoring that car. I had the body in perfect condition. It was the best paint job I had ever done, cherry red. I begged him to reconsider. I tried to explain how valuable the car was and how much money he could make on it. I even offered to buy it myself by putting up everything I owned. He just wouldn't listen.

Immediately I started making plans to steal the car and leave town, but somehow he figured out what I was up to. He told

me if I didn't get the T-bird ready for the Kompetition Killer by the next day he'd cut me out of his will. That made me sit up and take notice. Since his skyrocketing success, he had been raking in bigtime money, and I mean bigtime. I'll swoon over a '56 T as well as the next guy, but lose out on all that inheritance? No way. The car was ready and waiting for him the next day. As usual it was a great show . . . for some people. I couldn't stand to watch.

Over the next few years his success and recognition factor continued to grow. He ended up buying three more new car dealerships in the area. A total of sixty salespersons, mechanics, secretaries, and accountants owed their livelihoods directly to my uncle, not to mention a lot of subsidiary businesses like parts dealers, tire companies, and car washes. In spite of my fifteen years' loyalty to him, he left me at the used car lot to rot.

Everything was going his way. Buster was put in charge of one of the new dealerships and immediately began successfully practicing the trade he was born for. Money was rolling in. Then one day the good times ended. Uncle Fred was killed on live television in front of millions of his adoring fans . . . or at least football fans.

It was some sort of last min-

ute deal he had made. He called me early one Sunday at my place and asked what cars were available for another crushing commercial. The only thing I had was an old Volvo. He instructed me to get it ready and bring it around before noon that day. They would be airing the program that afternoon from one of his nearby new-car lots during a break in the broadcast of an NFL game.

Everything went like clockwork as it always had in the half a dozen or so times he had prepared for such commercials. The crowd had grown from a maximum of a dozen or so onlookers just three years ago to over a hundred today. Everyone wanted to watch Fred flatten the competition.

All went well right up until the moment the tank was supposed to climb up the back of the car and squash it into the ground. As the hefty Kompetition Killer climbed onto the roof of the little car, all four tires exploded, but the sturdy little frame would not collapse.

Suddenly the thought of over twenty tons of tank falling off a five foot pedestal sent people screaming and running for their lives. As the hatch popped open and Uncle Fred appeared, the camera was forced to tilt up and zoom in to try to catch his now familiar utterance, "Who's

next?" Instead, when Fred realized he was perched much too high in the air, the grin was replaced by the open mouth of stark terror. The cigar dropped from his lips, and millions of television viewers heard Uncle Fred mutter the historic words used by a multitude of previous generations to question an impending disaster, "What the hell?"

The left side of the car collapsed first, flipping the huge tank onto its side as Fred let loose with a scream akin to a Tarzan yell, only much louder and higher in octave. The Kompetition Killer continued its roll until it was about to come to rest upside-down on top of its turret. At that moment the idiot from sound-effects inadvertently tripped the tape that made that awful crunching sound. Highly inappropriate. Somewhere between turret and the asphalt was whatever remained of Uncle Fred's upper torso. My guess was it would be a small grease spot.

With Uncle Fred gone, my weird Aunt Millie got everything. Naturally I went to the funeral to try to comfort my new benefactor. She really looked terrible. Besides being somewhat overweight and pale, she was constantly coughing and wheezing into her one handkerchief.

I got a real shock when I saw Uncle Fred's casket. He'd been well over six feet tall. I swear the casket couldn't have been more than four or five feet long at most. One of the more tasteless, brainless guests actually had the nerve to ask her about it. An equally brainless Aunt Millie told him that the casket only contained his "working parts." I just thank heaven it was a closed casket ceremony. Okay, any questions as to why I call my aunt weird?

At this point it suddenly occurred to me that I was just one death away from inheriting a great deal of money. Knowing Millie's dependence on me, I decided to help her settle her estate. I told her that with her husband gone, the new car dealerships would probably suffer and she should sell them immediately. She did so. Naturally I asked her to keep the original used car lot. I still had a taste for working on classic cars. The Kompetition Killer was sold to a scrap yard and cut up into pieces. I thought I'd never see it again, but I was wrong.

As it turned out, her estate, my future inheritance, was worth well over twenty-five million dollars. I could barely contain myself when I saw the total figure. I immediately went back to my grungy apartment and

cried huge tears of joy all night long.

Then things started going badly. Aunt Millie went on a diet and exercise kick and started becoming healthy. It was frightening. I actually had nightmares about her outliving me and leaving all that money to someone else. That's when I knew I had to kill her. The only question was how.

For weeks I tried to think of every conceivable way to murder her without becoming a suspect myself. That seemed nearly impossible, since a potential twenty-five million dollar inheritance would make me the prime suspect. Weeks dragged into months, and the more time passed, the healthier Aunt Millie got. Where once I had cried in joyous anticipation, I now cried myself to sleep in sorrowful hopelessness. Then it hit me.

It was four in the morning when it struck. It was only about three point two on the Richter scale and was centered in Heathertown, nearly fifty miles away. It barely shook me awake in my bed, and I almost went back to sleep. Suddenly I jumped out of bed fully awake. I had an idea. Not just any idea but a great idea. I would squash the competition just like my Uncle Fred. It would take a long time, and I'd need a bit of luck, but it would work—and there

was no possible way I could be blamed for her death. I found myself thanking the heavens that I was fortunate enough to live in a place where the ground sometimes shook. I dropped to my knees and began kissing the floor in joyous salute.

That very morning I stood patiently outside a Southern California library over two hundred miles from my apartment, waiting for it to open. Disguised in a wig and mustache, I attracted little attention as I headed directly to the records room and scanned data from the newspapers and books. When I had transcribed all the historical information I needed, I left as quietly as I had arrived. Back at my apartment I pieced together the data and surmised that if the statistics held true I could reasonably expect another earthquake to shake the ground around Aunt Millie's two story frame house within the next three years. It might not be a powerful shake, but it wouldn't have to be by the time I got done. The first thing to attack was the foundation.

The very next day I took some flowers over to Aunt Millie. As we sipped tea in her downstairs sitting room, I mentioned how well she was looking since her new exercise program. I then suggested that I could build a complete gym and sauna for her

in her own basement. Since she rarely left the house, she was immediately enthralled with the idea. When she asked for a price, I gave her a reasonable quote that she readily accepted. I couldn't wait to begin and told her I would get some materials and start the next morning.

At first she watched carefully as I put in the pipes and wiring along the cinder block walls of the basement. We discussed the location of various items and the rough sketches she had drawn up. More than any other spot in the house, I wanted her to like what I did in the basement the most. It would help me to talk her into other changes.

After awhile, when the plans were pretty much decided on, she stopped coming down to watch me work. That was when I put my plan into effect. Just before I put up a section of insulation and wall paneling, I broke out the mortar or loosened the cinder blocks under the main supporting beams of the floor above. Any shifting at all, like from an earthquake, and the supporting walls were certain to give way.

Within three weeks I had finished the entire basement. As I had hoped, Aunt Millie was ecstatic about the results. I was about to suggest completely redoing the first floor kitchen when she suddenly took me

completely by surprise. She asked me if I would consider moving some of the interior walls to change the shape and size of some of the rooms on the first and second floors. I could barely contain myself. I hoped she didn't notice the tear of joy well up in my right eye. Next to go would be the supporting walls on the first and second floors.

As before, she brought me some rough sketches of what she wanted, and I obliged. Keeping her away from me while I was preparing the walls in the living quarters was difficult at first. Finally I began wearing a respirator and creating a lot of plaster dust as I removed the wall coverings. That, along with an aside about the possible dangers of breathing the dust, sent her scurrying for cover. Once I was alone, I was free to pull the nails from the studs and framework, thereby significantly weakening it. Wherever possible I substituted smaller, weaker timbers on loadbearing walls, using material from other parts of the house so that no new lumber would be found when it collapsed.

One day I realized I might have overdone it. I was finishing up the second and last story when I began to feel the floor sway under me. I knew it wasn't an earthquake. Hearing the

wind howling outside, I realized I had loosened the whole structure so much that a strong wind could bring it down. At that moment I was near panic. Fortunately the wind died down after a few minutes. I fully expected Aunt Millie to come upstairs and say something, but she never noticed.

I restored some of the structural integrity to the upstairs after that, but I wasn't certain it was enough to stop the swaying in a really strong wind. I had to come up with some other way of dampening any noticeable motion upstairs. When I finally figured it out, I really had to give myself a pat on the back. I'd put weight in the attic. Not only would it dampen the motion, but when the house collapsed, hundreds of pounds of crushing, deadly material would fall from the attic and destroy anything and anyone in its path. It was perfect.

During one of our tea sessions I mentioned to Aunt Millie that I still had a great deal of office furniture and supplies from Uncle Fred's original used car dealership. After a few minutes of reminiscing about my uncle and the good old days, I suggested that she might want to store some of his memorabilia and things here in the house.

At first she claimed there was no place to put it all, but when I

explained about all the space in the attic, she quickly changed her mind.

I made several trips between the used car dealership and Aunt Millie's house, moving file cabinets, books, and the like. Each time I unloaded the car and took the things up to the attic, I trembled in fear as the weakened timbers groaned and creaked under their added burden. It was during the last of these trips that I noticed a familiar metal plate lying up against the fence at the scrap yard. I pulled the car over and took a closer look. It was the piece of steel off the side of the *Kompetition Killer* that bore its name.

The guy inside sold it to me for twenty bucks. The thing was not very big, but it must have weighed well over a hundred pounds; inch-thick steel, you know. When I showed it to Aunt Millie, she seemed happy to see it and thanked me for rescuing it. After all, it was the *Kompetition Killer* that had started her husband on his way to making the millions that she was now enjoying . . . and I soon would be. I struggled with the heavy steel plate to get it up into the attic. Once there, the house gave a horrendous groan, and I prepared myself for imminent death. Fortunately, the noise stopped and the house remained

erect—precariously, but nonetheless erect. I lit out of there, fully expecting that the bumping of my car across her driveway would be sufficient to bring the whole place down like a house of cards. Now I just had to wait. It didn't take long.

Three months later it came. It was a fairly big one. I jerked the car into a U-turn even before the shaking stopped, much to the consternation of the drivers sharing the street with me that afternoon. Obviously they were unaware of the more positive aspects of earthquakes.

When I careened into the driveway of Aunt Millie's house, I spotted her seldom used car in the front. She had been home. As I pulled up to the remnants of the house, I was thunderstruck by how effective my work had been. There wasn't a single piece of the house that was more than three feet off the ground. Even the chimney had fallen. The whole place was flatter than the proverbial pancake.

She couldn't have survived. Still, one must be sure. I called her name several times. There was no response at first. Then I heard her moan loudly from somewhere under the pile of debris in front of me. She was alive. My heart and hopes sank.

I called again. This time she was more responsive and called back to me. She instructed me to

go get help to dig her out. Now I was faced with a predicament. If I didn't go get help and she died, no one would be the wiser. On the other hand, if I didn't get help and she survived, I'd be in trouble. Decisions, decisions. The bottom line was that I had to find out how bad her wounds were.

I asked her how badly she was hurt, but she couldn't tell. She was in total darkness and her right leg hurt terribly, but that was all she could say. I told her there was no one around and I was staying to dig her out. I got my tools and a flashlight from the car and began prying away debris from the spot where her voice seemed the loudest. I dug about five feet in two hours later when I finally broke through to a small open area where she was trapped. I could see her right leg pinned under a big timber, but she did not appear to be bleeding at all. Bad luck. I shone the light overhead and saw that the only thing that had kept a huge beam from crashing down on top of her was that sheet of steel from the Kompetition Killer. It had firmly wedged itself between two joists. When would things start going my way?

I told her I'd have to get the jack from the car to lift the timber off her leg. I slid backwards out of the tunnel I had made

through the debris. Once outside, I took inventory of my current situation.

Trapped as she was, she could survive for days, and someone was to sure to be by before then. After all, her house was about the only one in the area that was totally collapsed and that was a certain drawing card for rescuers.

Moving the steel plate holding up the beam, if it could be moved, would bring down the whole thing and kill her, but I was certain to be killed also. I rejected that idea forthwith.

Then, I spotted one of those loose cinder blocks along the collapsed wall. I put on my work gloves as I walked over to pick it up. The weight felt about right as I hefted it in my hand. I'd hit her just once, good and hard. It wouldn't make sense if she were hit by the same piece of debris more than once. The police would catch that right off.

I crawled back down the hole with the block. I'd turn the flashlight off before I did it so she'd never know what hit her. I guess I'm just a considerate sort of fellow.

The deed was over in a minute. It was awful. When I did it, all I could hear was that same horrible special effects crunching sound from those commercials. I really hate that sound, but I couldn't stop thinking

about it. I kept hearing it over and over in my mind.

I left the cinder block in the hole with her. With all the blood and hair fragments on it, they were sure to think it had struck her on the head during the earthquake and killed her.

After I backed out of the hole, I counted all my tools to be certain I hadn't left any behind. Then I threw the debris I had dug out earlier back into the hole . . . and just in time.

Three rescue workers in a pickup truck pulled into the driveway just as I finished. They seemed awed by the extent of the damage to the house, claiming it was the worst in the area. They asked me a lot of questions about who lived there and whether I thought anyone was buried under the rubble. I told them I thought my Aunt Millie was under there somewhere, but I didn't know for sure. The two men started calling Aunt Millie's name and poking under some of the looser material.

When the woman rescuer said something about getting a dog to search and then drove off in the pickup, I got real scared. If that dog found the body too quickly, they'd soon notice it was still warm, and the blood hadn't completely dried.

Fortunately, she didn't come back for more than two hours, and when she pulled up, she

didn't have the dog. Apparently all the dogs were tied up in other rescue efforts, and none could be spared. I began to think my luck was changing for the better.

I stayed at the scene until late in the day. One of the rescuers finally told me there was nothing more I could do and I ought to go on home. When I left late that night, they still hadn't found the body.

I must have been pretty tired from all that digging because I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I had a really bad night. I kept seeing myself sitting in the turret of the Kompetition Killer speeding toward what appeared in the distance to be the red T-bird, only when I got close, I could see it was Aunt Millie lying on the asphalt, unable to escape because of a trapped leg. Then, that sound.

I woke with a start to the different sound of my phone ringing. The bedsheets were soaked with sweat. The clock on the nightstand indicated it was nearly noon. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and picked up the phone. It was the county morgue. The rescuers had finally recovered Aunt Millie's body, and I was needed to make a positive identification.

When I arrived at the morgue about an hour later, a man and a woman were waiting for me.

They directed me to a room, where I made the identification of the body. I could see I had hit her pretty hard. I was more than anxious to get out of there when the two people I had met coming in stopped me. They flashed their badges and told me they were from Homicide. After last night, I didn't think I had any sweat left. I was wrong.

I did my best to act calm. I told them I couldn't imagine how Aunt Millie's death could be anything but the result of a natural disaster, the earthquake. They assured me it was murder and I was their only suspect. I tried to think of what I had missed while they were transporting me downtown for questioning, but nothing came to mind.

At first, they hit with me with the obvious; the fact that I was sole beneficiary to a twenty-five million dollar estate. They kept asking questions, and I kept insisting it couldn't have been murder. That's when they brought in the cinder block in the plastic bag. The bloodstains could be clearly seen on one side. I recognized it immediately but said nothing.

Then they explained it to me. According to the location of Aunt Millie's body when they recovered it, she had been in an upstairs bedroom when the

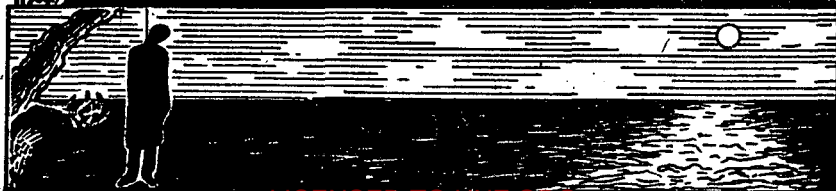
earthquake had brought the house down. The question was obvious. How could a loose cinder block from the basement foundation wall strike and kill a person on the second floor? The answer was even more obvious: it couldn't. They went on to tell me my fingerprints were found all over the internal structural members of the house and they were bringing in some engineers to determine whether I had weakened the structure, but I wasn't listening. I just kept staring at that damned cinder block. If only I had used something from the attic or the second floor, there never would have been an investigation, and I would have gotten away with murder. Like I said, no one in my family ever amounted to much, yours truly included.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



THE WHITE ROAD

E. F. BOZMAN



"Mild weather for the time of year."

"Yes," I said; "not very seasonable."

I did not even trouble to turn round and look at the stranger who had addressed me. I remember a soft Sussex voice, strong and deep, and I have an impression of someone tall, but I had come in to have a glass of beer by myself and was not in the mood for chance conversation.

It was Christmas Eve, about nine o'clock in the evening, and the public bar at the Swan Inn was crowded. It was the first evening of my holidays, and I had walked over from the farmhouse where I was staying with my mother, using the inn as my objective. I had just come down from London and was in no need of company; on the contrary, I wanted solitude. However, the landlord recognized me from previous visits and passed the time of night.

"Staying down at the farm again?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, we're glad to see you, I'm sure. Did you walk over?"

"Yes. I enjoy the walk. That's what I came out for."

"And for the drink?" he suggested.

"Well, it's good beer," I admitted, and paid for a glass for each of us. I felt rather than saw the stranger who had accosted me hovering behind me but made no attempt to bring him in. I did not see why I should buy him a drink, and I wanted nothing from him.

"It must be pretty well three miles' walk down to where you are," the landlord said. "A tidy step."

"Yes," I said, "a good three. Two or two and a half down to Ingo Bridge, then another mile from where the lane turns off to West Chapter."

"Well, I suppose you know you've missed the last bus down. Must have been gone half an hour. There's only the one in from the Bridge, and that's the lot."

"Yes, I know," I said; "I don't mind."

Just then I heard the noise of the door latch followed by a creak as the door swung open, and half turned to see the tall stranger going out. I caught a glimpse of him before he shut the door behind him.

"Who was that?" I asked the landlord.

"I didn't notice him—he must have been a stranger to me. Funny thing, now you mention it, he didn't buy a drink."

"He seemed to be hanging round me. Cadging, I suppose."

"You get some funny customers at this time of year." The landlord was evidently not interested in the man. "It'll be dark tonight, along that road," he volunteered.

"Yes," I said. We finished our drinks, I said goodnight, and made my way to the door across the smoke-laden room.

It was pitch dark outside by contrast with the glow of the inn, and as I slammed the well-used wooden door behind me, the shaft of light streaming from the parlor window seemed to be my last link with civilization. The air was extraordinarily mild for the time of year. My way lay by a shortcut across the church fields which joined the road leading toward the sea, a difficult way to find at night had I not known it well; alternatively I could have gone a longer way round, starting in the opposite direction and making three sides of a square in the road which I was eventually to join by the shortcut. I knew my ground and decided on the footpath without hesitation. By the time I reached the church fields I realized that the night was not really so dark as it had seemed to be at first, for I could see the black tower and belfry of the church looming against a background of lighter gray, and a glimmer of light in one corner of the church suggested eleventh-hour preparations for the great festival. Clouds were scudding across an unseen moon, full according to the calendar, discernible now only secondarily by a patch of faintly diffused light toward the south; knowing the lay of the land I could imagine the clouds swept away and the moon hanging in its winter glory over the cold English Channel a few miles away. Although the air was temporarily muggy with the presage of rain, there was a deep underlying chill in land and sea, the ingrained coldness of the short days.

The footpath across the fields was narrow and muddy, a single-file track. I stumbled and slithered my way along it until I reached a narrow wooden bridge with two handrails. Here I paused for a moment, looking at the dark, swollen stream which was just visible, black and shining, below my feet.

I was now near the point where the path joined the road, and as I paused, my elbows leaning on the rail of the bridge, listening to the far-reaching silence, I heard in the distance the sound of footsteps along the road. In these days of heavy road traffic this old fashioned, unmistakable sound is a rarity, and I listened fascinated. The steady, distant tread, gradually loudening, began to grow on me, and by the time I had made up my mind to move it was beating a rhythm in my brain. My path now led diagonally up a sloping

bank to the road, and I crept up it silently, hearing and thinking of nothing but the approaching footsteps. The thought occurred to me that I must not let the walker catch me up, that something important, something connected with myself yet out of my own control, depended on the success of my efforts, and I began to hurry. I tried to dismiss the idea but it would not be banished, and as I reached the swing gate leading out to the road, the footsteps sounded unexpectedly near. They rang on the road, and I could hardly resist the temptation to run.

I compromised by stepping out briskly, swinging my arms. It was ludicrous, I argued with myself; there was nothing to be afraid of, and my own feet tried to reassure me by dimming the sound behind me. But the pursuing footsteps would not be drowned; they were implacable. I attempted to speed up, without allowing myself to hurry or panic, but I could not shake them off. They were gaining steadily on me, and as their loudness increased, tingles of fear began to go down my spine. I could not turn round and look—could not, I realized, because I was afraid to.

The road at this point runs between high hedges and trees which shut out what little light was coming from the sky. Nothing could be seen except the dark shapes of the trees, and an occasional gleam from the black, wet surface of the tarred road. There were some outlying farm buildings and barns immediately ahead, but no glimmer of light came from them. The overhanging elms dripped their moisture on me from leafless branches. No traffic was within earshot; the only sound was of footsteps, mine and my pursuer's.

Left right, left right, left right they went behind me. The walker had long legs. Left right, left right—the din increased alarmingly, and I realized that I must run.

“How far now to the bridge?”

A soft voice, almost in my ear, shocked me, and yet released the tension. I sweated suddenly and profusely.

I recognized the voice of the stranger who had addressed me in the Swan Inn. He had left just before me and must have walked round by the road, I realized, while I had taken the shortcut across the fields. I could not immediately disguise my racing heart, but I managed to speak calmly, in a voice which must have sounded weak in contrast with the strong Sussex resonance of the stranger.

“About two miles,” I said.

The stranger said nothing more for the moment but fell into step beside me as if assuming that we were to walk together. It

was not what I wanted, partly because I was ashamed of my panic of a few moments ago and partly because I had been looking forward to walking the lonely stretch of road ahead by myself. I turned my head but could see nothing of my companion except his tall, dark form, vaguely outlined, and he must have been wearing a long coat which flapped below his knees. I was the next to break the silence.

"When we get past the farm buildings," I said, "and round the next corner, we come to a long open stretch. It's a lovely bit of road, a special favorite of mine, absolutely deserted usually. On clear nights or days you can see the sea in the distance."

"There's a little hill about halfway along—by an S bend."

The stranger's remark surprised me. Why had he asked me about the way if he knew the district?

"So you know the road?" I asked querulously, as if I had been deceived.

The stranger muttered, "Years ago," and something else I could not catch. The detail he had remembered was a significant one. The open stretch ahead of us, nearly two miles in length, promised at first sight to run straight for the sea, where it joined the main coast road, but halfway along this section of the road there was a danger spot for speeding motorists, an unexpected S bend over a little mound. Just past the bend, as the road straightened itself out again and went down the far side of the little hill, heading between low hedges for the sea, there was a notable isolated thorn tree standing on the left of the road. Its trunk leaned toward the sea, while the twigs on top of the trunk were all swept in the opposite direction, like a mat of hair, blown by the prevailing wind. From the trunk two stumpy branches sprouted, each with its bunch of twigs held out like hands; these, too, were windswept. The trunk was not gnarled and sprang strongly from the ground—no dead post, driven into the earth from above, could have achieved that appearance of strength.

I was about to refer to this tree, which was a particular landmark of mine, when we heard the sound of a distant motor. My companion seemed to be unexpectedly nervous—I could feel his anxiety. The sound increased rapidly, so different a progress from approaching feet, and before we had rounded the sharp corner leading to the open stretch of road, a Southdown bus flung itself round the bend and was almost on us. The headlights flooded us, gleaming on the stranger's face, making him look pale as a ghost,

and lighting the road immediately in front of us to a brilliant white.

The stranger was so dazzled by the sudden brightness that he cowered into the hedge, shielding his eyes with his hand. In an instant the bus had charged past us and round another corner, taking its lighted interior and its warm passengers with it into the enveloping darkness of the countryside.

I heard my companion murmur, "The white road. The white road." Something in the way he said the words brought a picture of my youth to my eyes, of a time when this same lonely road was white and dusty, with flints, and I could see myself bicycling along it in imminent danger of punctures, hurrying to the sea. I saw the white road, the white sea road, not the black and tarred contrivance of today, yet the same road with the same trees and banks. It had always been a lovely country road, and it still is.

We left the farm buildings behind us and entered the lonely stretch. It was too dark for us to see a glimmer of the sea ahead or anything behind the low, banked hedges on either side. A light rain began to fall, driving in our faces.

"That was the last bus," I said; "we'll meet no more now."

The stranger ignored this remark, and his next words fitted in exactly with what had been in my mind when the bus distracted us.

"There's a thorn tree, isn't there?" he said; "just beside the road round the double corner." He spoke as if he knew the way by heart, yet obviously he did not remember it exactly. He had not even been sure enough of himself to take the shortcut by the church fields.

"Yes," I said; "why do you ask?"

"You've noticed it yourself?" he inquired anxiously.

"Yes."

"And it's still there?"

"Yes, of course." I could not for the life of me imagine what he was driving at. Yet even as I spoke the words confidently I found myself in doubt. I remembered my mother saying something about workmen on the lonely road, how they were widening it at the bend and spoiling its appearance. Like me, she had an affection for it. I had passed the spot that very evening on my way to the inn, yet when I came to think of it I could not be sure whether I had seen the tree or not. I had been preoccupied and had not looked for it specially. But surely I would have noticed, I thought, and said aloud, "At least it was there the last time I passed."

"When was that?" The stranger spoke very directly and forcibly.

I was about to say this very evening but, realizing my uncertainty, said instead, "About this time last year. I was down here for Christmas."

"There's a story told about that tree in these parts," he said.

"Oh," I said; "what do they say about it?"

"They say there was a suicide on that spot. A man from the village." The Sussex burr was soft and confidential.

"What happened?"

"He hanged himself on the tree."

"A man couldn't hang himself on that tree," I said; "it's too small."

"There's a seven foot clearance from the fork," he said eagerly.

"Oh, well," I said, "it's a sturdy little tree. I've often noticed it standing there all alone, holding out its branches like hands."

"Yes," he said, "that's right. Like hands. And have you seen the nails? Long and curved. They haven't been cut, any more than the hair. Have you seen the hair?" His voice was strained, and I felt that he must be looking at me. I turned to read his eyes, but it was too dark to see anything but the tall shape and the long coat beside me.

"That tree didn't grow in a day," I said.

"I don't know how old it is." The stranger spoke apologetically.

"But it's an old story—maybe twenty, thirty, forty years old. I couldn't be sure."

There was a pause for a few minutes. We must have covered half the mile between the farm and the tree before I spoke again.

"What's behind the story?" I asked. "What do they say?"

"They say there was a woman in it. A dark girl, one of the coast guard's daughters down at Ingo Bridge. He was a married man, you see."

I waited for him to go on. He spoke as if it mattered vitally to him.

"It had been going on a long time, they say. Then one night, one Christmas Eve, he left his home for good and went to the inn, and perhaps he had a drink or two there, though nobody knows that. He had made up his mind to take the girl. She was going to leave a light burning in her window, and he would see it from the distance, you see, when he turned the corner by the tree. That was to be the sign, if it was all right. Well, he left his home for good, to get that girl. But he never got her. His wife got him—by that tree."

"I thought you said it was suicide."

"Ah yes, that's what they say. But it was his wife that got him."

"You mean she followed him?"

"No, I mean that she got him there."

We walked another two hundred yards before he added, "I mean that he saw her there, in his mind's eye. He couldn't take the girl then. He couldn't, however much he wanted to. He couldn't because he belonged to his wife. That's what I mean when I say his wife got him."

"It's a queer story," I said. "I've never heard it told before."

"Oh, you hear it among the older men. It's common knowledge," he said.

"It's a queer story," I said, "because who told it in the first place? Who was to know what was in the fellow's mind? Who was to know what actually happened?"

"He was dead, wasn't he?" The stranger spoke irritably. "A man doesn't die in these parts without talk about it. A lot of talk."

"But how did he die?" I insisted. "Did he hang himself or was he murdered?"

"He was murdered."

"What the devil do you mean?" I shouted angrily. "Murdered, by a tree?"

The stranger clutched me by the arm. "Have you seen the tree?" he whispered. "Have you seen it standing there year after year, leaning against the southwest wind, with the hair streaming and the hands outstretched, and the long nails growing—?"

I was suddenly aware of the loneliness of the road and of the darkness and desolation of the downs around me and the sea ahead. The stranger's next remark, though spoken in a low voice, seemed to shatter the darkness.

"By God! what's a man to do when a woman pulls at him? A dark girl. And what do men have daughters for, eh? I ask you that. Whose fault is that?" and then, as if brushing aside an imaginary criticism: "If I were to meet that coast guard's daughter down by the bridge tonight I'd tell her . . ."

His voice tailed off and I said nothing. The coast guards' cottages are still down by the bridge, true enough, but the coast guards had been disbanded years ago. Years ago. He must have known that.

We reached the little hill in the road, mounted it, and turned the first half of the S bend. The light rain had ceased, and the clouds were thinning. We both of us knew that when we passed the next corner, the other half of the S, we should see the tree.

Just then the clouds broke suddenly and the full moon shone

through. It whitened the black road, silvered the gleam of the sea ahead, and illuminated the low banks and hedges with the dark rising downs beyond. We turned the corner and both stared toward the thorn tree.

There was nothing to be seen. No tree. Nothing. The place where the tree stood was blatantly empty, and the moonlight seemed to emphasize the barrenness, showing it up like a sore, focusing the attention. I suppose I had been unconsciously visualizing the tree as I knew it because I was more than surprised by its absence; I was shocked, profoundly shocked, and the recollection of that absence of tree, that nothingness, is more vivid to me than my memory of the tree itself. The clouds now scudded from the moon, leaving it cold and clear and agonizingly circular in an expanse of sky. In what seemed to be a blaze of light I put my head down and ran.

I ran toward the silver sea along a white road, a ribbon road of memory, and I could believe that the dust rose under my feet and powdered my boots, though with another part of me I knew that I was wearing shoes, not boots, and was pounding down a wet, tarred road. In the moonlight that road seemed white and dusty, and I pattered along it with the desperate urgency of a small boy who must deliver some message or run some errand of overwhelming yet not-understood importance. I ran and I ran, urgently and desperately, thinking no more of my strange companion yet in some way intimately associated with him.

Along the white road I ran, past the signpost at the turning to the farm, knowing yet not knowing what I should see. The clouds had gathered again, a dark pillar over the sea, and the blaze of whiteness was already dimming. There was a light in the coast guard's cottage at Ingo Bridge. I headed straight for it but did not reach it, for a woman lay across the road, an elderly woman. She must have dropped her basket as she fell, and her parcels, little objects and toys that she had bought for her grandchildren perhaps, lay scattered around her. She might have been shopping for Christmas, I thought, and had missed the last bus at Ingo Bridge; then she had tried to walk home, but her strength had failed her and she had fallen in the road.

I ran to her side and raised her head. She was too weak to stand on her feet, and I lifted her in my arms and carried her the few yards to the coast guard's cottage where the light was still burning. For those few steps the road was white and flinty—but then it is so

now; it is only a little byroad—and I found myself speaking not to an old woman who had fainted or was dying, but to a young woman. And the words I spoke were not mine but someone else's; the words of the stranger who had accompanied me to the tree. They were framed without my help.

"That was no murder. That was no murder by the tree. I always belonged to you, all along, really. I see it all now."

The woman opened her eyes, and there was an expression of love in them. I could not say whether it was I or my stranger who spoke the next words. They were said very gently and comfortably.

"There are things better left unsaid. Better left; you understand."

She nodded and closed her eyes, and then the stranger and the strangeness left me.

I knocked at the door of the cottage. A man opened it, then called to his wife, a grayhaired woman dressed in black who must have been a beautiful dark girl in her time. I explained what had happened, and they took my burden from me and laid her on their horsehair sofa. They knew who she was, of course, for she was from the village.

But I did not know. I could only guess. And as I walked back in the inky blackness of an oncoming rainstorm, back to my corner, then up the lane to the farmhouse where my mother was waiting up for me, I cast round in my mind for a missing fragment of knowledge, something I must know yet could not remember.

I discovered it at last accidentally, while in my mind's eye I could still see the thorn tree, standing there holding out its branches, its mat of twigs all set toward the northeast, and from the fork a dark form hanging, twisting slowly in a long coat, a thing with a back to its head but no face, a dark thing twisting slowly beside a long white road which stretched in a dusty ribbon to the sea. I discovered the missing fragment of knowledge in the more exact recollection of my mother's remark, made only that very morning. "They are widening the white road at the bend," she had said—we always used to call it the white road between ourselves—"and this evening they are going to cut down that little old thorn tree."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Jo Dereske's estimable public librarian, Miss Helma Zukas, makes her fifth appearance in **Out of Circulation** (Avon, \$5.99), and this time the scholarly sleuth finds herself in a situation that's deadly even without a murderer on the loose. At the pleading of her flighty friend Ruth, Miss Zukas reluctantly agrees to a hiking trip in the Cascades. True to her vocation, Miss Zukas has prepared herself by reading up on the subject, as well as carefully packing a duffel with all the equipment they should require. But the discovery of a dead body, the rescue of an injured man, and then the violence of an unexpected mountaintop blizzard drive Helma, Ruth, and four strangers into a cabin cut off from the world until the storm abates. The mild-mannered Miss Zukas proves her mettle battling the elements in several super action scenes, not to mention battling wits with a coldblooded murderer.

Readers attracted to its title—**The Edith Wharton Murders**—surely won't be disappointed in Lev Raphael's second mystery featuring Nick Hoffman, English professor at the State University of Michigan. There are enough rounds of scholarly infighting, struggles with unlettered students, and battles with the increasingly right-wing administration to satisfy any lover of academic mysteries. Better still, literary tidbits are tossed right and left, and Nick can toss with the best of them, even as he bemoans his fate of hosting a Wharton conference on his campus. Raphael's protagonist is witty without being mean, and Nick is surrounded by a colorful

cast like the leaders of the two snarling Wharton scholarly camps, the much-touted lesbian author and her cosmopolitan lover, and the bestselling romance writer with her rude New York editor in tow—and that doesn't even include Nick's eccentric departmental colleagues. Bright, breezy, and often laugh-aloud funny. (St. Martin's, \$21.95)

Harold Adams continues his award-winning Carl Wilcox series with **The Ice Pick Artist** (Walker, \$21.95). The time is the Depression; the place is Corden, South Dakota, home of the hotel owned by Carl's kin, where the "hobo son" has returned to work as unpaid manager while his dad is laid up. He's working the front desk when the lively Lillybell Fox of Sioux Falls checks in, but he's out (flirting with Lilly, actually) when the second guest checks in. The next morning Lillybell is discovered dead—murdered—and the mysterious Mr. Murdoff has disappeared in the night. Carl has worked with the local law before (he has a knack for crimesolving), so it's logical that he would poke his nose into the business. It leads him around the state and into secrets that one man hoped would stay long buried. Adams writes with a spareness and a laconic note that seems to suit the flat countryside and its homespun folk, but it's Carl's personal take on things that keeps fans of this series eager for his next appearance.

For a bit of holiday cheer pick up Jean Hager's **The Last Noel** (Avon, \$5.50) and the company at Tess Darcy's Iris House Bed & Breakfast. In addition to her young step-siblings who are visiting from their Paris home, Tess's guests are a pompous junior college theater director and his mousy wife, imported by the Community Church in Victoria Springs to direct this year's Christmas pageant. It's immediately clear that peace may be the last thing the director is bringing to Tess's little corner of the earth. His grand designs—announced at the first rehearsal—have baffled, alienated, and even angered most of the congregation, and someone clearly plans to do more than put charcoal in the jerk's stocking.

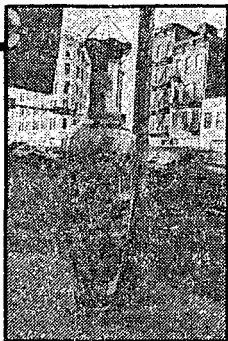
Yuletide is a booming season if you're a hotelier, which means that when Ellen Hart's **Murder in the Air** opens, Sophie Greenway is up to her ears in running her family's four-star Maxfield Plaza Hotel in St. Paul. Her husband Bram is also busy with a new project. His radio talk show leaves him time to be drafted into a project launched by the station's new owner: the revival of a vintage radio serial mystery complete with the return of some of the original 1950's actors. As the snow piles up and Sophie pre-

parens for the commitment-ceremony reception she's preparing for her son and his lover, the radio show begins to attract attention. It seems to be a retelling of a real local murder, the killing of the girlfriend of the new station owner's son, a young man who fled the long arm of the law, only to disappear in Europe, apparently. Clearly the new owner, the young man's elderly mother, believes that her son was innocent almost forty years earlier—and that someone from that original radio cast knows the truth. When the first death occurs, Sophie and Bram are forced to agree that justice, perhaps, has not yet been served. This has everything one wants in a book for long winter nights' reading; just grab your afghan, and enjoy! (Ballantine, \$5.50)

Lauren Haney has set her Lieutenant Bak series in a very exotic time and place: ancient Egypt, the eighteenth dynasty of Queen Maatkare Hatshepsut, to be exact. In **The Right Hand of Amon** (Avon, \$5.99), Bak is a member of the royal police force. He and his comrades are commanded to accompany the golden icon (believed to be the god Amon) up the Nile in answer to a tribal chief's plea for the healing of his ailing son. At the same time the river gives up the body of an officer highly placed in royal circles, the obvious victim of a murder, and only the sand drawings of a mute orphan boy whom the dead man had sheltered give Bak a clue to the assassin. There's lots of historical detail and physical description embellishing the tale of this ancient detective's search, and Haney has added tension with Bak's need to discover the truth in time to carry out his original mission.

THE STORY THAT WON

The July/August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California. Honorable mentions go to Bernice F. Weiss of Livingston, New Jersey; C. T. Landry of LaPlace, Louisiana; Judith Shenk of Aberdeen, Mary-



land; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; B. Bryan Puk of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada; Sharon Luncheon of Kew Gardens, New York; Carolyn Brown of Beaumont, Texas; and John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

LARGER THAN LIFE by Alfred W. Cross

Granfus saw the deliverymen carry the vase into the woman's home through huge double doors. He knew she must be loaded. It was a one-in-a-million opportunity for a home invasion.

Granfus waited until the deliverymen left, and then he let himself in the back door, which, he thought, seemed much larger than a standard door should be.

While the woman was admiring her purchase, he hid behind a huge wingback chair as tall as himself. He sneaked up behind her, knocked her unconscious, and tied her up. While waiting for her to regain consciousness, he poured himself a scotch from her wet bar, into a drinking glass as large as a brandy snifter.

Granfus heard her stir. "Where are your money and jewels, lady? Anyone who can afford that vase must have big bucks."

"It's not a vase, you dolt. It's a cremation urn."

"You're nuts. That could hold a family of ten."

"It's a gift for my husband. He's rather large."

"Nobody's that lar . . ."

At that moment the floor vibrated, and the drink in his hand rippled. He stared in wonderment as the ice began to tinkle against the sides of the glass.

"That's him now."

ALFRED HITCHCOCK AND ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINES

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attn: Carole Dixon

Classified Advertising Dept.

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(16) \$76.80	(17) \$81.60	(18) \$86.40	(19) \$91.20	(20) \$96.00
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(26) \$124.80	(27) \$129.60	(28) \$134.40	(29) \$139.20	(30) \$144.00

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AH January '98

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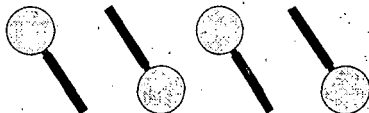
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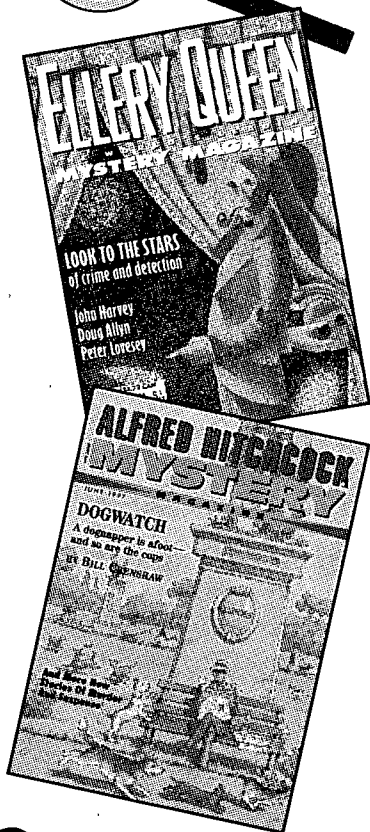
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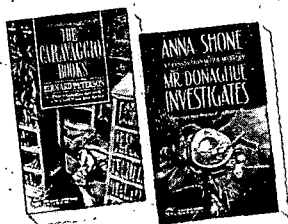
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